the art of falling

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the art of falling

by machiavelli

Summary

In which Harry, a newly-created angel, strikes up an unlikely friendship across the millennia with a demon named Riddle.

Notes

As always, if you have the time, comments and feedback are really really appreciated!

The Naming of Things

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You know what? I'll admit it. The first time we met, I was pretty boring.

No personality or proper emotions at least, that's for sure. You can't really blame me for it—I was still new at that point, all fresh-faced and blank-slated, and just so in *awe* at this whole, insane world that my father had created. Or at least that's how I recall it. It's hard to look back and truly remember. Similar, I imagine, to the way a human recalls its own infancy.

It's curiously hard to try to squeeze your mind back into a smaller shape, after all.

It was all so *peaceful* back then. The humans had yet to discover faith, so I spent a lot of time just wandering. Sometimes tasks would come from Seraphim, small things, but most of the millennia I was lost in my observation, gazing at the beauty of it all. Humans were fascinating. Like stars, I thought. My mind didn't grip time well back then either, and so with each blink it seemed that a new tide of tiny, frothing souls would crest and fall, and somehow a thousand years had passed.

Anyway, I'm getting distracted. The first time we met: this I do remember.

I remember watching them cry.

Their tongues were thick, skin blistered with the heat. Crops lay shrivelled into crackled grey paper in soil-turned-sand. The sun poured down like white mercury until it evaporated as a shimmer from the earth. My little emotion-seed sprouted: pity.

They waited, after all, for a rain that would not come.

The Rain Maker sat in pose, face stained with the blood of the last shrivelled berries, their juice just enough to decorate the harsh planes of his forehead and cheeks. I could hear his mind, his quiet pleas. His thoughts kept fluttering, butterfly-like, to his boy, his apprentice. Six harvests of age, not nearly enough time for the Rain Maker to impart much of his craft.

I circled him. Placed my hand on his brow.

Be at peace, I said to him. *Do not fear it.*

His shoulders softened, eyes tear-smeared.

A *sh-sh-sh* noise floated towards us. In front, the old woman shuffled closer. Her small body was fattened by her coat of feathers, tiny, curled feet leaving bird-like tracks in the dust. The others, seated in a ring with the Rain Maker at it's head, fell silent. Our eyes all met on the knife, polished and black in her hand, curved in a smile.

"Come," she said. "It is time to do your duty."

The Rain Makers eyes opened, black and gummy. He was young still, teeth yellow and sharp. He did not scream, or run. A hum rose as the others crowded closer, swaying a little. A moan rang out: someone wept. Beneath his breath he began to chant, to weave the song of the rain.

I watched, curious as always. This, I knew, was their last resort. Their Rain Maker was precious. His sacrifice was a great cost.

But duty must be done.

The humming came to a violent stop, and left an echoing silence in it's wake. In it, I heard the catch of breath, nostrils flare, fists clench.

The Rain Maker twitched. His hands shook on his lap. His heart beat like a butterfly trapped in his ribs.

The old woman, their leader, leant down. Soft, so soft was her thin voice. "For you, Mother Sky."

She plunged the weapon into his throat. The skin split, like the skin of a grape, folding under the edge. His lifeblood fell into the ground as he gulped on silence.

It was sad—distantly sad—that neither he nor any of them would ever find peace with our Father. Not through any fault of their own. I couldn't blame them for their ignorance; after all we had not told them. But, just as the Rain Maker did his duty, body twitching and jerking on the flat, cracked earth, as must I.

I crouched and allowed him to see me. His gaze latched on to my form immediately, terror stained awe. I read the question in it, nodded my head. My hand reached up, up into the sky, to where the tiny beads of moisture lay, still too young and asleep to fall.

Come, I commanded.

The first drop hit the floor with a weighty thud, slurped up immediately by hungry soil. The second fell on the Rain Makers head, now still, and slid to where his eyes stared, glassy and unseeing. It trickled down in a pink tear, collecting the dried juice from his cheek. The third and the fourth drops fell twinned, and soon the air was thick with steam and with light. The people wept and fell to the ground, still hot with blood, and shouted their pleasure.

Without much thought, I laughed out loud too. I couldn't help it. I laughed to see them happy, to see their smiles and their joy.

"Why are you laughing?"

The question took me by surprise. I closed my mouth and turned.

A little boy. He was slender, pale and sly, black hair like coal. I understood him immediately as Other: the ones we were not supposed to speak to. He must have been drawn by the death, the misery of the lone weeper.

“Tell me, angel. Why do you laugh?" he repeated in that high, childish voice of his. He sounded confused, a little angry perhaps.

I'll admit: I was intrigued. He was the first Other to have approached me. The rest of them tended to flee with my arrival.

"I laugh for their happiness," I said calmly.

The boy's beautiful face coiled into a sneer. "Why do you care for it?" He kicked the body on the ground. ”Why do you bother with this? They don't understand—they will never."

I tilted my head at him. These questions were unexpected. Was it his age? He was the youngest I’d seen, that was for sure. Maybe that was why I couldn’t help my softness.

"Beauty does not require permanence," I said, “it is beauty because it dares."

A moment passed. He stared at me with quicksilver eyes. "I don't understand."

I looked past him, to where the Rain Maker's child cried against the soft thighs of his mother. "Hold out your hand," I said simply.

The boy followed my instruction guardedly. His palm was still soft, smooth. I could see it had not yet grown as blackened and hateful as it would. *Maybe this one…*

A tiny bubble of energy and form bounced in the curl of my fist. I dropped the gift onto his outstretched fingers, watched his face as he peered closer.

His nose wrinkled. "What—a flower?" he said flatly, holding it out. Tiny pink petals fluttered, unfurling in a kiss.

The edges of my mouth curled. "Beautiful because it blooms and *singular* because it falls."

The boy looked at me, aghast, and then snorted. He crushed his fist around it and I felt a little stir of regret in my chest. No, this one had made his choice.

“That's a very boring way to think," he informed me, and stuck his hands in the pockets of his robes.

I inclined my head, turning back to the people, to their rejoicing. It tasted like honey on my tongue, and it filled me up, light and effervescent.

"What is your name?" I asked him after a while.

He frowned beside me. "I don’t own a name.” He bent to rake his eyes over the rip in the Rain Maker's throat, curious. "And you?"

There was a calling from somewhere, a soft whisper in my ear. Seraphim. I had to leave, to go to the next. "Harry.” It was a close enough approximation.

"Harry," the boy twirled his tongue around the syllables.

"Would you like one?" I asked, resisting the pull in my chest. It called me West, this time. Odd—I had not heard from her in 6,000 years, and now twice in one day…

"What?"

"A name. Would you like me to give you one?"

His almond eyes grew wide. "Why would I need that?" he said, impetuous. "To be like them?"

My lips stirred. *Yes, he was Other, but…*

"Riddle," I murmured, amusement surely dancing across my face.

His own expression grew dark and he opened his mouth.

I gave in to the pull, laughing, and blinked away.

*

Okay, so it was an odd conversation. But both of us didn't know any better! I, for one, had never taken a human form at that point. Was only a few billion years old—still unsure as to what it meant to be an 'I'.

Truth be told, I am a little embarrassed to say that the second time was no better.

Jebel Sahaba was red and pillowy. The sand under my feet was a soft sheet over the hardness of the packed earth. Green plants frothed out in thin clumps, a shock of colour against black sky. The moon shone down, washing everything in her cool silver breath.

Turiel and I wept together. Tears, laughter—both came easily to beings like us. It was instinct. We crouched over the death and touched the tender tips of our fingers to the foreheads of those slain. As much as we were allowed, we tried to ease the suffering of those making a long, slow journey to the end.

Turiel, bless him, was older, and therefore a bit more fiery.

"We will never let them forget this," he whispered to me fiercely. "***They will remember this happened, for time and time to come***." I could almost see the lightening spark between his teeth as he spoke, bringing it into existence. This was our first real failure, and it stung, whip bitter and icy.

Across the pit, the Others flickered in and out of the shadows, feeding on the death and the hatred. They slipped through the battle-stained bodies of the victors, hardened eyes watching as the men heaved bodies into one of the pits. Their lust grew and grew, until it was whipped to a frenzy, twitchy with glee and power.

In between them, the air shimmered. A familiar small form slipped into the night air.

Like the first time, we noticed each other instantly.

"Harry," I heard him call out.

His brothers and sisters looked up, curious, as did Turiel.

Riddle was still a child. Older, to be sure, but still with pudgy cheeks and sweet doe eyes.

I said nothing. I already knew I would have to answer to Turiel for his call.

"Better luck next time," he said, and smiled, a cat's smile. His tongue darted out, a slither of pink to lick the blood off his fingers.

I turned away, inexplicably saddened.

Turiel replied for me. "Do you feel proud of yourself, demon? This was needless. It is a defamation, a despoiling of the gifts we have been granted."

Riddle's face turned savage with glee. His siblings giggled.

"Proud?" he purred, slinking closer. "Yes, I do feel proud. Is this not a celebration of *beauty*," his eyes flicked to mine on the word, "to watch them heave out their short, fluttering lives, fill them up to the brim with passion, with fear, with anger? Is this not the truest of themselves they can become?"

Turiel and I looked for the beauty. We saw the pale lilac of viscera, the dark clots of blood, smelt the shame and the suffering. Heard the thump of meat as one by one the dead were toppled into a split in the ground, their time cut short.

"For what?" I found myself saying.

Riddle's eyes jumped to mine. "Does the reason matter? They wanted more women. More crops, more land. More, more more."

Our exchange was catching attention. One of power had noticed: I recognised the stretched-tall figure of Zaze, known for nightmares.

Riddle fell silent.

Zaze loomed over all of us, angel and demon alike. His black hooves pointedly crushed skulls as he sidled closer.

"Sweet angels!" he called. He gleamed, all of him: dark eyes, dark skin, dark hair. "Run along now. You have lost—this is no place for you."

Beside me, Turiel vibrated with righteous anger. I felt something similar twinge in the core of me.

“Come,” my brother said tersely.

His words from before had been woven into life. Nobody would forget, and that was all we could do. Zaze was right: this was no place for us.

As we pulled away, Turiel released a rush of light—Divinity—as he bestowed a parting gift of peace. Someone spat a curse behind us as we fled, up into the sky.

From above, the perfect circle of slaughter was visible as a macabre cyst on the land. Villages were still burning and the disturbing wails of widowed women rang in the air.

I could not understand. He thought this beauty?

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He was a teenager when I saw him next. Long and gangly, and still with a heartbreaking, dangerous beauty.

This time, he found me.

I was resting, as much as we could rest. The cliffs around me were great stone monoliths, gleaming silver from the dusky rain. One moment: peace. Serenity. Silence.

The next, he ripped through the air, birthed from nothing but the breeze, and half barrelled into me. His fingers shot out to grip my arm, silver eyes wide.

I reached out. Well, half-reached out; I was too surprised to really know what to do. Here he was, only a few hundred years from when he’d smirked at me so viciously from a battleground. And now—well, I didn’t know what I read in those eyes. Fear, perhaps.

“Harry,” he said. His voice was deeper now, half-way between a child and a man.

“Riddle.”

“Do you know,” he said calmly, “I’ve been looking for you.”

I frowned. And then noticed the noise.

Quick, thundering footsteps. Coming from where the light shone through the valley in a thin white vertical line. Shadows loomed towards us, stretched like taffy by the fading sun.

Riddle, uncharacteristically, said nothing.

I turned, a little worried, to face whatever was coming. By doing so, I put Riddle at my back, behind me. Instinct prickled, unhappy at the position, but I ignored it. He was asking for my

help. I'd seen it in his eyes. And I shouldn't—I knew I shouldn't. But what was I, if not a being made to help?

The shadows shivered and grew, before, in a mere few seconds, they were replaced by their owners.

A huge, slobbering beast, at least the size of three or four men, stood before us. A hellhound, I presumed—I'd heard my younger siblings gossip of them. It had two mutilated faces on either side of its head, both with jagged, icicle-like teeth. Astride it sat a tall, thin man. His black eyes stared out like two round marbles from a deathly-pale face. When he spoke, somehow it hurt.

"You hide behind one of them?"

Riddle's shoulder knocked into mine, a slight touch, as he shifted. The pain stopped.

"Dantalion," Riddle said.

The rider—Dantalion—sighed. "Pitiful."

Riddle said nothing. Did not move. Just eyed him, wary.

"And you, angel? You consort with him?"

I watched, curious. I didn't feel a need to reply.

"Well," Dantalion said meaningfully. He slipped off his beast and leant to him. Stinking saliva had pooled on the rock beneath its scythe-like claws. "You may eat the child," he said.

Riddle's voice was a cold whisper at my neck. "Harry."

I could not turn to him. The hound's four eyes stared at us, red suns with a tiny pupil pricked just off-centre. It's nostrils flared and it growled, low and deep enough to shake the cliffs.

For its size, it was remarkably swift. It bounded right over our heads, executed a turn that should not have been possible, and went straight for Riddle.

When it lunged, Riddle threw his hands up as if to shield his head.

Why did he not flee? I wondered. *Or fight, as his kind loved to do?*

But he did neither.

The sound that came out of his mouth when the claws pierced his shoulder was soft. Barely more than a breath as it tore right through the material of his soul. I could not imagine such pain, to have one's being split by another. I had never felt it, after all.

But that one tiny breath…

I was still young, a creature of instinct. There was no second guessing or deliberating, just acting.

I held a hand up towards the beast.

Immediately, it veered away with a groan. The two heads seemed to melt with anguish as it fled back to cower behind its master in a single powerful leap. I understood: my Divinity was still pure and so *powerful*; a harsh thing to bear for one so mutilated.

“You interfere, angel?” Dantalion was surprised.

I smelled blood in the air.

“You may not eat him,” I decided. “Leave.”

The pale, thin man stared at me. His terrible gaze hovered between Riddle and I, as if he was weighing up the worth of destroying us both.

But I had more power.

His parting words were crisp. “You,” he said to the boy beside me, “have humiliated yourself quite excellently.”

Then the cold air shimmered darkly, and both man and hound disappeared.

“Fucking hell,” Riddle said.

I turned with a frown, a chastise on my tongue. I paused. Stared. He lay on bloody stone, face glistening with sweat as his shoulder wept black.

“You are hurt,” I said. I didn’t know how to feel about it.

“Oh really,” Riddle said. “I hadn’t noticed.”

The black liquid continued to ooze out of him. He grew paler by the second.

“Why are you,” I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry, “not healing?”

Black splattered down his chin. His silver eyes fluttered.

“Punish…ment.”

By my sides, my fists curled and uncurled. I blinked. The image of that tiny child, stubbornly pouting up at me through the rain flashed through my mind. There was something hot in my chest that I didn’t understand.

“There there, Harry,” Riddle choked, amused. “No need to look so distraught.”

My fingertips skirted my face. I realised he was right: it was all… crumpled.

“I…”

My instincts had me moving before I knew what I wanted to say. I made the decision easily. I sat on the ground next to him, reached inside me and pulled.

It hurt. The pain was hot and white and made my teeth ache. Carefully, carefully, I poked a needle tip hole into my essence and tugged free a tiny waving strand of glowing light.

“What are you doing?” Riddle sounded afraid and possibly the tiniest bit hungry.

“I do not wish you to be hurt.”

“Wait, you can’t—”

But back then I was good at ignoring him. Regardless of the weak attempt he made to struggle away, he was as strong as a kitten before me.

“Harry!”

The white thread burnt my fingers as I began to weave it through the shredded muscle of his shoulder. *In, out, in, out,* through blood and bone I stitched him back together. I could see it burnt him too, hear it from his gasps, but I knew would not truly cause damage. Not when it was given freely, given with love.

It took mere minutes to finish. The thread floated as an ephemeral bridge connecting us. I stared at it, enraptured. The barest slither of my soul. I could hear it calling to me. It didn’t want to be trapped in the darkness of an Other, it wanted to come home.

“Don’t,” Riddle said. His voice had grown remarkably strong in the short time I’d been working.

But he was too late. I severed it.

The world around me flashed. My breath left me in a sharp hiss and I fell backwards. I tried to make sense of this new, terrible sensation, but logic had fled.

I looked within myself and felt tears well up. Where the part of me had unspooled was a tiny black fleck. A hole in my soul. My eyes were drawn to Riddle’s chest, at the blackness within. There. A tiny golden glimmer. Small enough, deep enough that nobody would notice, like my own.

But he was healed.

He did not touch me. He did not speak. Just looked at me in the eyes with an expression too complicated for me to truly categorise.

My cheeks were wet. The world slowly began to re-solidify.

Still silent, Riddle pushed up to his knobbly knees. He was inches away; I could feel his heat, smell the smoke on his robes, the oil-slick tang of his blood.

The air shimmered—I blinked—and he was gone.

*

Time was a curious thing: I could dip in and out like water, play with it, splash around. It passed quickly when I had my orders and my work—and then millennia would stretch slowly before me, endless and beautiful.

It would have been… yes, around 12,000 years or so since I had seen him last. He had been hiding, I thought. Or maybe, like myself, he was simply busy with his tasks.

In any case, on this occasion things were different. We had both taken mortal forms. It was an honour, for me at least, and I assume for him too. To be trusted with such a beautifully complex and delicate clock lit a warm, proud glow deep in my belly. It was all so new and intense; I tasted every feeling, every emotion and licked my lips. My thoughts began to come more quickly, ran up and down and exploded with motion.

To be honest, it felt *nice,* to be homed. All my essence was finally distilled in a straightforward way, my usual nebulous form woven into something more tangible, more able to categorise and abstractify and wish and hope.

Of course, Seraphim was now too important to command the likes of me. I was sent to Rome by Remiel, fawn-like, quiet and gentle. She whispered to me in my dreams that an Other was here, that they sought to kill and burn. I knew my duty even without her words: I was here to protect the fledging faith that we had managed to finally seed.

At long last, the people had discovered us, our Father. Their belief was sometimes complicated by humanness, but it was pure enough that the rest of us were kept busy. There was a wine-heady feeling of momentum now, in the time I snatched with my siblings. We felt powerful. *I* felt powerful.

And so I was only a little surprised when I caught the flash of a dark-haired boy in the crowd. It was the weekend market, the bright morning air filled with wood smoke and the thyme scent of grilled meat. I was not surprised, however, when he winked at me as we passed, his arm slung casually around the rounded shoulders of a noble lady. He was tall now, I noticed, taller than my mortal form at least. He'd grown into the bones of his face, his shoulders broadened and lean with muscle.

Dread coiled in my belly like a nest of vipers (I could feel that now, unfortunately).

For a moment I considered following. Dragging him aside and peering in to see that tiny speck of myself that called out to me.

But I had my own tasks to complete.

Later that night, Remiel whispered to me.

She told me of Riddle and how he crooned into Nero's ear, stroked his ego, fed him wine and honey and beautiful young boys and girls from the Nighthouses. How he poisoned him with half-truths, wicked silver things that dripped like acid into the Emperor's brain and straight down to his hard belly where the fires of insanity bubbled.

There was little I could do. I ignored him, poured myself into my work. Cultivated the talent and grace and laughter of the community that were united by the truth.

It taught me a lesson, when I met him in Rome. One that I have never forgotten.

A wound will fester if left unattended. And that was all the Others do. They wound.

The wind that night was strong. It whistled through the twists and turns of the narrow streets, blown by a smooth purple sky. Rome baked in the summer heat, people panting to their houses after dinner, and only in the gardens, where rain rose from the wet green trees, was any relief found.

I'd been resting, tucked in my pallet when Remiel screamed.

I opened my eyes, slippy with sweat. I could already smell the smoke. Someone pounded at my door. Screams materialised out of the hot blackness. I wrenched back the strips of stained cloth that covered the windows.

Outside, fire towered in a wall of orange, a spitting beast that pawed at the earth and ate its way through the wooden merchant houses of the Circus Maximus. My heart began to thunder, horror cresting. It had spread—everywhere I looked was veiled in black plumes, wisps of burning flame that danced along creaking beams.

What should I do? I searched but felt no guidance. Even Remiel had fallen silent. *What could I do?*

The feet of my body decided for me. Jumping up, I pulled on a robe and hastened out of my room. Every door I passed I banged on with my fist, shouting, praying for support, for help. I was living with the faithful, as I had been for the entirety of this life, people I'd known for two decades by now. We took to the streets, wandering in directionless horror, laden with strips of cloth soaked in aloe, water pots, anything we could.

It was war, but against an indefatigable enemy. *What to do?* I murmured blessings at all I could, prayed, hoped, calmed. But I was mortal, and although some powers remained mine, I couldn't change what was ordained to be.

And so the fires raged on.

It was on the sixth day of Rome burning, as the flames slowly pretended to die down, that I noticed the shift. Nero's words thundered through the streets, repeated in half-hysterical fervour: "*these Christians, this race of men following a new and malefic superstition... they will burn as we have burned!* ***They will scream as we have screamed!***"

They were Riddle's words. Through my dread I could recognise it.

We stood no chance of hiding—and why should we? We could hardly believe it. Our people were well known, had lived in these streets for a span of years.

Our naivety was the rope with which we hung.

Those we had been attending to only days prior came to take us. At noon we were paraded through the streets, fear a cold, hard lump in my stomach. My sandals crunched on broken glass and wood as we were herded on like cattle to the central square.

My breath caught as I saw it: the raging furnace, the carefully, intentionally stoked heat, the same as that which we had worked so hard to stop for the last week. A council of noblemen presided on a great wooden platform and directed my friends, my family, my people to be beaten into the ground and burned alive.

Of course he was there. It was he who had pulled off such a stunning, terrible victory. My heart sank as I saw him, grinning with mischief, but I had no surprise.

"Christian scum," someone spat. The crowd was shouting, faces wild.

I understood. Two thirds of the city was gone. So far six days of destruction, countless lost and maimed. The people were untethered, homeless, jobless, purposeless. Someone must be blamed.

My time here was at an end, this I understood too. As I walked, bowed against the torrent of rage, I tried to gently touch the thoughts around me. *You must remember charity*, I tried to instil. *Kindness, generosity. Help each other. Love each other.*

Soldiers looked down and their gazes passed over me. None of their faces saw mine; I was not a human now, just a task to be delivered. My heart bled for them as the screams of my brothers and sisters echoed in my ears. The air was suffused with suffering, and I could barely contain myself. This body *felt*, it felt so strongly and so deeply, and it *hurt.*

"Move," came the order, barked brusquely from behind me.

They added more wood to the fire. Flecks of black bone-ash floated up in the wind like spring petals. Already from here the heat was unbearable. It was some mercy that my arms had long since lost feeling, stretched and fastened with rope behind me.

My neck prickled. I turned, knowing who I would see.

He'd now noticed me it seemed.

Harry, I felt him say.

I couldn't speak, I was coughing too hard.

It's nice to see you—in what is my new favourite city, no less, he continued. He watched as I was pushed closer, both to him and to the flames.

A blow caught me on the back of the head and I stumbled, dizzy.

Rome…where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their seed and grow. Truly, he laughed, *to be in Rome is to be free!*

I wanted to reply to him, the one I'd named, but I couldn't. Either he'd stopped talking or the screams were so loud now I couldn't hear him.

And it was my turn.

I was already burning by now: my lungs weak, eyes dry, my lips, tongue, teeth all stained black with soot.

And then they hurled me in.

It was an inferno, the heat unbearable. My legs staggered under the weight of the pain, a roar in my ears.

It was only for a moment though.

Cool air touched my face, and I turned, questing towards it. A gap, an exit. I didn't understand but still I threw myself towards it—sweet relief from the heat!

I collapsed on chalky ground, blind. I was barely conscious, my limbs burnt, the pain intense. I could barely hold in the screams. It knew that by now it was too late for me, but there was a single comfort: the closer I came to death, the more I began to return to my immortal self. Inch by inch it lessened, but still some small evil vestige clutched the core of my bones, simmering like an angry acid.

I waited, patient to die.

A hand grabbed my throat. I knew to whom it belonged, forced the shreds of my eyelids to open. He stared down at me inscrutably, beautiful and flushed pink with health. To my surprise, I felt the weight of a knife enter my heart, a cold shuddering bite that tore through muscle and rib in one smooth, agonising press.

Ah—

"Why are you smiling?" His voice was quiet and familiar as he held my gaze. His silver eyes had darkened to burning stars. It took a moment for the words to filter into meaning.

I couldn't feel my face—I didn't realise I had been.

When I spoke, my voice little more than a croak of air."Because this is a kindness."

"I've just stabbed you through the heart, and you call me kind?" he said.

"Yes, Riddle," I whispered as the world began to fade, my body falling away. It was strange to come out of such a precise existence, welcomed back into a closer union with the universe.

Riddle held me up as I died.

“I didn’t—” he said.

But I was gone before he finished.

Chapter End Notes

Quote "Beautiful because it blooms, singular because it falls" - adapted from Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443), encapsulating the Japanese concept of *Mono no aware*.

Jebel Sahaba is a prehistoric mass grave, often cited as the oldest known evidence of warfare. It lies on the bank of Nile, and is at least 11,600 years old. 11,600!!!

Nero and the Great Fire of Rome, July, 64 AD. There are varying historical accounts of this - some which tell of Emperor Nero ordering the fires to be set to make way for his immense new palace, playing the fiddle and laughing as the city burned. Others indicate he was out of Rome at the time, and was actually instrumental in providing aid and organising the city's recovery afterwards. Regardless, it did kickstart Nero's horrific persecution of the Christians, whom he blamed for the tragedy.

Charged with Light

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After that, I have to admit I felt different. It seemed some things from my experience as a human clung to me, dug their nails in deep. I found myself a little more... uncertain. A little more emotional.

Years followed Rome. I enjoyed it. Yes, there was disease, and pestilence and war, but there was also innovation, democracy (of a sort), art, learning. I watched, spellbound, as faith spread, as worship commenced. Suddenly we were busier than ever. And of course, that meant seeing him more often—now that he had decided to stop hiding.

I caught sight of him as I was peeking over the shoulder of one I'd blessed, years ago. I'd been excited to see this one's work, had come to watch him periodically through his life. His talent had flourished, as did his delight at the smooth slick of paint as he touched brush to canvas, gently carved out the whites of the eyes.

Imagine my surprise to see a familiar face, painted in the middle of a masterpiece that would be celebrated for a thousand years to come.

My jaw dropped. "The arrogance," I couldn't help but blurt out.

Of course he heard my implicit thought of him. He came, a slight wind ruffling the papers in the room and then he stood beside me, tall and black and looming.

Riddle turned to look at me, a little shocked.

"We gave him his powers for Christ," I continued furiously, "to spread the--"

His laughter rang out, like bells. Even the artist paused his work, cocking his head.

"Oh so you found it, did you?" he grinned. "It was just a little greeting, to say hello."

My eyes flashed at his disrespect. "I blessed him," I insisted stubbornly. "He was for me."

Riddle eyes were light with amusement. I remembered those eyes, staring thoughtfully into mine as my lungs stuttered their last breath.

I blinked the warning away, spine shuddering.

His lips turned down. "Really, it's not like I led him astray."

My hands waved to the bottles of wine, stacked up at the edges of the room. The man's lips were stained purple, even at such an early hour.

"Really," I said.

Riddle rolled his eyes. "Loosen up, Harry. Wine is the drink of the people."

I found my fingers rubbing at my brow. A peculiarly human trait I had retained. Was this why only a few were deigned worthy for a mortal body? Because the habits and the feelings stuck to you, like glue?

"Look, there's no need to get upset about it," Riddle's voice floated past my wondering.

I felt the hum of something changing.

My head shot up. "What have you done?" I gasped, eyes immediately finding his.

Riddle smiled. "Another gift."

My mouth opened but he was gone.

His 'gift', as it turned out, I would discover later. Much later.

Years passed until I was called by one of my own, back to the city. There was an excited hum in the air as I settled my wings, and she was laughing, almost to her knees with it. It made me smile—we needed more joy. All this talk of war had cast a solemn air over the last few hundred years.

"What is it?" I asked.

She was sipping on giggles, the word broken. "Look."

I followed her finger, turning.

A seventeen foot marble masterpiece, three times the height of a man. It was I as I had been in my mortal form in Rome, rendered down to the veins in my hands as they clutched the sling, the curls of my hair.

My mouth opened but I was speechless.

A fresh round of giggles burst forth. More of us had come, Uriel, Ariel, Dina. I heard their exclamations as if underwater.

He had done this, I was sure of it.

I did not feel rage, not usually. But the horror of this—this goading, this *sin*—bled through me, indignant and glowing. My fingers clenched and my teeth ground together in a manner that was definitely not familiar to what I was.

"Riddle," I demanded hotly, but he did not answer.

I cast another look up, could read in the marble itself that this one would not be forgotten, not for a thousand years, not for ten thousand. The Others had made it so.

Well. If he would not come then I would seek.

I left my brothers and sisters, chattering excitedly, marvelling. I followed that tiny speck of myself to a quieter place, the bank of a river. I did not know when or where this was—I did not care.

I drew up short, my anger somehow extinguished all at one.

He was naked, pale limbs coiled in the sun, asleep under the shade of a willow. My eyes traced the gentle curl of his fist, the splay of his legs, his softness, so apparent in sleep. I could suddenly see the boy of a million years ago.

I watched his chest rise and fall, the caress of the soft, trailing leaves, the way the curves under his eyelashes were stained dark with tiredness. I found myself curious, for the first time. How had he become this? Was he made? Did he Fall?

Silent, I ducked through the veil of leaves and settled myself by his side. The river opposite splashed a quiet tune.

I do not sleep, not like they did, but I found myself at peace, my thoughts settling.

We stayed there for a time, enough so that my eyes had closed too, my back resting on the bark of the tree.

Eventually he stirred beside me.

"Harry?" His voice was soft with sleep.

As he woke, the world took on an edge again. The rush of the river a little louder, the wind a little stronger. It was a sudden realisation: he was powerful now.

When had that happened?

"I saw your 'gift'," I said, eyes still shut.

I felt him smile next to me, the shift of his spine as he stretched. "Oh? And what did you think?"

My anger returned. "A beautiful pity," I said sharply. "That creation wasn't meant for me."

"No pity at all," Riddle said. He was watching me. "I wanted them to see you."

I turned to glare and drew up short. I hadn't realised how close he'd come. I hadn't sensed his movement at all in fact, quiet and quick, like a snake.

"No more gifts, please," I managed.

Energy rolled off him, a crackling force. He was free. And he was very, very dangerous.

He inclined his head. "As you wish," he said.

I was an angel; I knew it was a lie.

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I was mortal again, and growing weary. As was he.

I had graduated through the ranks of our kind. My power had grown, my divinity allowed to blossom. I had returned to receiving my tasks through Seraphim, a great honour.

But with it came more responsibility. And I was no longer what I had once been, instinct-driven and sure of myself. Perhaps it had come from spending so much time trapped in a mortal body, or perhaps it was simply the process of growing up. But my path seemed less sure, for the first time in my existence.

The war between us had grown fraught with tension. Rumours had spread: the peripeteia approached. Whispers of a turning point—where either Heaven or Hell would triumph—had been floating around for at least a millennia, but in recent years they had been whipped up to a frenzy. And maybe there was truth to them. After all, things had started to seem unsustainable.

And I was tired.

Darkness poured through shattered glass panes in inky clouds. High up, on the tottering church roof, we sat together, sighing as our legs kicked the air. It was not so easy for us to meet now as it once had been, but every so often we would find each other. I don't know if it was that piece of me within him, wanting to come home, or simply the enjoyment he gained from riling me. Either way, he had found me again.

It was a bad time.

My hands shook from where they clutched the tile. “Sometimes I wonder,” I said. And stopped. Breathed in the taste of smoke in the cold air. “I was created to protect and to guide. And yet…”

Riddle said nothing, waiting.

“And yet it *never stops.* There's light, joy, peace. But there's also death, and pain, and war." My eyes caught on the blood, glinting like seawater below. "One saved. One not. A constant, inexhaustible carousel. I don't understand it."

He sounded tired too. It was a small comfort.

“I don't imagine many do.”

I didn’t know what else to say. I let my torso fall backward until the roof cradled my back. Above me, the sky was a star-eaten blanket. The glowing points formed a carpet of infinity, a spiderweb of energy. I remembered when they looked different. I remembered when the sky had been empty.

"I want to help,” I said. “That is all I’ve ever wanted."

Riddle sighed. His hand, when it found mine, was icy cold and rough. His thumb smoothed over my palm. "I know, he said, and it was almost gentle. “But it will never be enough,"

I dragged my eyes away from above, let them rest on him. His uniform was stained black, oil and blood.

“Why did you choose this?” I found myself asking. It was a question that had stuck in my throat for a thousand years.

His thumb stilled. For a time he said nothing.

And then: “Is it not beautiful enough to *be* without having to do so in such a rigid cage of what is 'good'?"

There he went again. How many times had he thrown our first meeting back in my face?

I sat up, pushed my hair out of my face. "But that's the point. Existence is such a gift, why squander it on suffering and harm? Why choose hate if you can choose love?"

"But don't you see Harry, there is no hate or love, no good or bad either. Morals are entirely created." His silver eyes pinned me like daggers. "Surely if there’s a duty it’s to live freely, not 'well'. *Freedom* is the gift. *Freedom* is the point."

I shook my head. "No. Look around you. If you are, indeed, free, then this," I gestured to the bodies, the burning metal, "this is needless. Why do you all take it to such an extreme? They would do it without you, why do you stoke the fire higher?"

Riddle stiffened. "We are like this because there must be balance. If you were not so white, we would not be so black."

I looked back at the sky. Where did this anger come from? This body, its emotions... they were heavy.

He leant towards me. This close I could smell him, smoky like the wet shadows in a deep dark wood.

His lips brushed against the whorl of my ear, voice like slow, dripping honey. “The truth is not always beautiful, nor beautiful words the truth.”

I rolled my eyes, hiding my fear, and pushed him away. "Lao Tzu?"

He smirked.

I felt strange. Hot and confused. I didn't want to be here, staring down at the mess of my own failure with the one who was responsible. It hit me suddenly. What *was* I doing here? I had others to help, another continent to look over somewhere in the future. I didn't need to be sitting on one of His places of worship, darkened and ransacked and defiled with all that He stood against.

Dangerous, something reminded me. *This is why they're dangerous. Clever silver tongues.*

I drew myself up, tugged my white medics armband straight. "I need to go," I said.

Hurt flashed in his eyes before they closed off, back to gleaming pools. He got to his feet, dusted off his khaki trousers, picked up his rifle. I gave it a disgusted look.

"Right," he said. "Back you go to the hypocrisy of serving in a mortal war. Enjoy."

My mouth tightened as I followed him down the creaking wooden steps, back to the floor of the church. He was mortal, but his shadows still flickered a little too long, his gait too smooth.

His sneer was illuminated by the moon as he looked around, considering the paintings and offerings that lay in ruin.

I wanted to leave. "'Till the next," I made myself say.

"'Till the next," he said quietly.

*

I needed time to think after that. And so... I avoided him.

It was easy to do; I was older than he, more powerful, and could banish his name from my mind with a single thought. I told myself to move on, focus on what I was meant for.

I helped.

Years, decades, bled into one. I blessed, I protected, I enlightened. I watched as mans bright, burning curiosity led them further into the intricacies of the world, as science blew forth at a pace I'd never seen before.

I saw traces of him, of course I did. My eyes found his footprints, imprinted like a shivering brand on the edge of battlefields and graveyards. I heard him in the the syrupy drip of false promises that oozed from those in power, one hand always clenched in pantomime of a gentle fist. I turned away each time, ignoring the slight pull in my chest that told me to find him, to try to change his mind and make him see the goodness, not the evil, in those he sought to corrupt.

Eventually, this too was forgotten as I was given my most important task.

The calling came on a clear night in winter, the moon beaming down a pale smile. Following my instincts, I appeared, slipping into a city somewhere in the East.

It was a large room in a modern hospital, black windows reflecting the overlapping forms of the occupants inside. I took a moment to marvel at the fluorescent lights, the stink of antiseptic and the thrumming of electricity through metal wires. *How clever,* I thought in wonder, *how beautiful*. It seemed like only days ago I was watching as healers scraped off tree bark, grinding it into a gritty paste and pressing it unknowingly into wounds which would never heal.

It never ceased to amaze me how quick the progress was in this time.

A cry pierced the air, and my eyes sought it out. A human baby, fresh into the world, orange-segment lungs working to help her bawl.

A warm hand descended on my shoulder. I looked up.

Seraphim was beautiful. Perhaps the most beautiful of us all. Warm, brown skin, calf-eyes, pouting lips. She smiled at me, grace in the crease of her eyes.

“Hello brother,” she said.

“Sister,” I said respectfully, ducking my head.

“Thank you for coming.”

“Of course.”

Another cry rang out. The mother shushed her child, cradling it to her chest. Her cheeks gleamed, like the metal rails on the bed.

“You must watch her, Harry,” Seraphim said gently. “You must protect her. She is important, in what is to come.”

Of course, I was surprised by that. In all the time we had known each other, Seraphin had never prefaced a task in such a way. I felt my brow furrow; although I was of high rank, I was by no means the highest. A task such as this one surely should have been commanded by someone of greater calibre, someone more worthy?

Seraphim read the question in my eyes.

“He has chosen you,” she said. “You are the one who will watch over her.”

Love bloomed in my chest. We both turned to look at where the child wriggled. Her soft pink limbs were flushed with blood, tiny face screwed up in confusion.

I stole closer, unable to help myself.

As I looked down at her, even Seraphim, my oldest, dearest sister, faded away. My heart widened instantly.

How beautiful! I thought, captivated. Her tiny soul, so pure, fluttered with blooms of fascination and joy. I wanted to keep it safe, cupped in my hands.

“I will guard her,” I said. The promise lay resolute in my chest, a quiet, sleeping diamond.

Seraphim nodded, and vanished.

The child's cries faded. She had fallen asleep on her mother's breast.

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The task was a gift. To immerse myself in the child gave me the respite I needed and allowed me to settle. The strange, pent up energy that I hadn't noticed building within me began finally to dissipate.

I remembered who I was.

I remembered how it felt to fall in love.

I glowed with pride as she took her first steps, said her first words, made her first friend.

Of course, there was ugliness in the world, but I patiently guided her through it, tried to keep my lessons as delicate as possible.

It took me until the autumn of her seventh year to really understand the gravity of her existence.

In those days, my mind was in somewhat of a meditative state. I had tied myself to her and thus existed in a kind of dreamy absence, my presence only rushing back in when I sensed a moment of danger or teaching.

She was in a playground. Her father chatted to the others nearby and she squealed and jumped to catch the leaves shed by turmeric brushed trees. I rested high up, my back against a branch, and listened to the old, wise energy thrum through the tree itself.

A broad hand on the back of my neck had me turning in surprise.

I should have known who it was from the peace that filled the air.

"It's been a time," they said in greeting. Their buttery yellow eyes burned warmly into my own.

My shoulders softened automatically, and my breath slowed, rising from my belly like a wave.

I beamed. "Ele."

The girl's pleased scream had us both glancing back towards her. She slid down the slide, her limbs wriggled in free fall, and landed with a gentle bump on a carpet of crunchy wheat-coloured leaves. In no time at all she had sprung back to her feet to race back up.

I smiled through a sigh. The last seven years had been calm and sweet. All that was required was a steady, watchful gaze, and the occasional nudge of protection. It was nice. I felt like I was finally back where I was supposed to be.

The hand on my neck disappeared. Ele grinned at me and shook their auburn hair out of their eyes. "I'm pleased for you, Harry," they said. “She is a joy—and this task honours you.”

"Thank you," I said, a little shyly.

We watched her play for a time, and listened to the wind swish through wet leaves above us.

“You must have guessed.”

I glanced over in surprise.

“Guessed?”

Ele looked rueful. “Why she is so important.”

I mean, of course I’d guessed. I was no fool. But I didn’t know who else listened, here in the treetops.

Ele made the decision for me.

“She is the peripeteia,” they said.

It was just a confirmation, nothing more, but it still felt like a blow—like the world had shifted beneath me.

I suppose it must have shown on my face, as they chuckled.

“You knew,” they said. Their hands found each other in contemplation, shifting the white of their robes away. "There will be a marked point in this conflict, a time where destiny splits. Two possibilities," they mused. "She must be protected, for our way to prevail."

Joy burned in my throat. "I will see her through well," I said firmly.

They laughed. "I do not doubt it, brother. I am glad to see you in such a position. We worried."

I cocked my head.

"Out of us all you have always been the most curious," they said carefully, after a pause. "Curiosity can be... dangerous, if misplaced." They clapped me on the back once again. "I wish you good fortune, brother."

"And I you," I replied, a little unbalanced.

They worried for my curiosity? My thoughts strayed to Riddle.

It was a mistake. A soft chime of interest rang out somewhere in the world. I knew his head would have pricked up, eyes narrowed as he sought to find me.

I blocked it immediately, shrouded myself back into the bark of the tree. I shook my head at my action. If there was ever a time to ensure he could not become involved, it was now. I would see out the lifespan of my child, and then I would seek him out again. We'd gone longer without seeing each other, after all. What was a hundred years?

I turned to see if Ele had noticed. They were already gone, evaporated into the wind.

Relief unspooled a little and I relaxed.

Below, the child caught a leaf, jumping with excitement.

All of me softened. She may be the key, but she was just a child. Still sweet with youth, and so innocent.

And she was mine to help.

Chapter End Notes

Michelangelo's famous sculpture of David (from the story of David and Goliath) stands at seventeen feet tall, in the Accademia Gallery in Florence, Italy, and was completed in 1504. It is still celebrated 500 years later as an artistic masterpiece.

Take your pick of wars here - I was loosely thinking about the Great War

Quote "The truth is not always beautiful, nor beautiful words the truth" - Chapter 81 of the *Tao Te Ching*, a Chinese classic text traditionally credited to the 6th-century BC sage Lao Tzu.

Also, the word *peripeteia* refers to a sudden reversal of fortune or change in circumstances. So I'm using it to basically denote a turning point in the Holy War ^^

The River of Woe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ten years passed in a blink. I saw my brothers and sisters occasionally: sometimes they came to see her, sometimes me. Strangely I didn't meet any Others. Either I was protected or they just didn't realise, I didn't know which. But whatever the cause, time flew by in a tranquil, honeyed stream.

As she began to mature, my work grew harder. With age comes a bruising of innocence, and protecting her became a more intricate task. I had to decide which losses were necessary and which parts must be kept intact. I saw her weep in anguish, claw marks into her skin in self-hatred, watched in sadness as pain after pain came her way. It hurt me too, but I knew it was necessary. This was *life,* after all, and life meant all of it. However much I sought to spare her, it wouldn't be fair to keep this half of the world from her.

Sometimes I thought of him. I thought of how he would agree with me, that hurt was necessary for learning, that existence shouldn't be confined to only the good and the joyous.

It was the spring of her seventeenth year when I began to realise there was something wrong.

Any darkness she accrued she was usually able to purify by herself. Occasionally, if I judged it necessary, I would use my Divinity to hasten the process, but most of the time it posed no problem.

But then one day, I noticed something different.

She was eating breakfast at the kitchen table, chopsticks fumbling rice into her mouth, when I thought to peer closer into her soul. My brow furrowed. It was as I had suspected: a strange blackness clung to her.

I followed as she went about her day, mulling it over. Maybe this was normal in mortals, maybe she just needed further time? I wasn't overly alarmed. Sometimes the darkness would clump like this, clearing out space to be filled later by light.

But it continued to grow.

Another first: my power was unable to touch it. It was some new form that fled as soon as I called forth my Divinity.

After that, I spent night after night working on it as she slept. I slipped into her dreams and tried to coax it from her, stuck to her during the day like a shadow to try to see where it came from. Yet nothing changed. As time passed, it began to metastasise and spread. She drifted now, brown eyes dreamy and glazed.

When you have witnessed as much as I, you begin to sense when the universe stops to pay attention. I could feel it now, a collective *holding of breath*. She was the peripeteia*,* the turning point.

My worry only grew. My Father had tasked me to protect her, and I was… *failing?*

A fortnight passed before I decided to call an elder of my kind. Not Seraphim. Ezekiel. He was older, one of the first created. Calm, strong, righteous.

I left her in the classroom with her classmates and packed lunch, and floated out through the window on the fifth floor. Outside, the sun came down in pale white shards and the smell of cut grass filled the the breeze. Spring: I could feel the new life in my fingertips. The school grounds lay small beneath me: rows of bicycles, neat patches of purple flowers, a few black-ant students crawling over the path.

Calling one such as Ezekiel was not as simple as reaching out to my other siblings. He had many tasks to attend, many matters that required his attention and care, and would not be listening out for my voice.

I drew my power together, and thought through my message. I poured in the images of her soul, slowly freckled with darkness, her face bleaching of joy and colour. I explained how I had spent many weeks attempting to free her from it, that no matter how much cleansing I performed, it still seemed only to grow.

And I sent it off: a whisper in the wind, full of my power.

To my surprise, I did not wait long. Ten minutes or so (and I had expected days, weeks perhaps!). I was still outside the school building, under the warm blanket of the sun when he appeared next to me.

I blinked. Ezekiel was small and gracious, fairy-like. Quick as a whip and razor sharp. His hands reached out for me instantly.

“Tell me, brother,” he said urgently, “where is she?”

The look on his face had a dark, draining pit open up in my stomach. Had I missed something? I hadn’t expected this. Mild worry, perhaps, or intrigue.

But he was afraid.

“She is inside,” I said. “You mean to go to her now?”

Ezekiel nodded, mouth pressed into a line. “Yes. And we must hurry—he will know I am here.”

He?

But there was no time to ponder. I searched for her. To my surprise, she was not where I thought she would be. She was above us—the roof.

The pit in my stomach grew.

“Come,” I said, and led him.

We passed through the air between moments and popped out in the open space of the building’s roof.

The scene imprinted itself on my eyes. Confusion, followed by a lightening flash of shock.

My child, my charge. Stood outside the safety railing, her slender, sock-covered toes curled over the soot-smeared cliff-edge of the roof.

I didn’t understand.

Did she—did she mean to *jump*?

And then I saw him.

He had changed, in the century we had been apart. I could always read him well, but now... now I could not. There was no trace of delight or mischief in his face. He looked dark and cold. Regal, almost.

And his wings… As all of ours do, they glimmered out of sight. But I saw enough. There was no trace of the downy grey I was accustomed to; instead they gleamed a terrible, absolute *black*.

What had he done, to claim a power like this?

There was no time to get distracted with him. I made to go over to her, to pull her back from the edge.

Silver eyes flickered to me, rested there.

“Ah—ah—ah,” Riddle chided.

My legs froze without my permission. Every nerve was alight. I was hyperaware of my charge, paused on the precipice as the wind whipped at her hair.

“Hello Harry.”

Behind me, Ezekiel stiffened.

I didn’t want my name in his mouth. My shock was tinder, and now my fury burst to life.

“It was you,” I said. My voice shook. “You have poisoned her.”

“Yes, it was me,” he said.

Ezekiel stepped forward. “I am sad to see you here Thomas.”

Thomas? He knew Riddle? I was even more surprised to see the tremble in Ezekiel's hands as he clasped them behind his back.

Riddle said nothing but understanding washed over me in terrible waves.

No other being would have been able to escape my detection. Only one with a part of me embedded in themselves would be able to hide like he had, camouflaged as my own.

And so I realised: *it was my fault.* The betrayal swam up to form a lump in my throat. I had thought us friends. I had been naive. This was why we were warned about them. *This was why—*

Ezekiel's firm voice cut through my panic.

"We will not allow this." As he spoke, his power rose in the air. It was truly great, for one with such a delicate appearance, a magnificent wave of love.

"You do not have a choice," Riddle said simply. He wasn't looking at Ezekiel. He was looking at me.

And there, on the edge, my child took a single step forward.

It was enough.

None of us were in mortal form. We could not touch the physical world—we could not stop her.

Memories flashed through my mind: her huge soft eyes wide with joy and surprise as the autumn leaves fell. Her scream of delight on the slide. I remembered her prayers too, always for others. Her goodness, her kindness.

She fell and something broke within me.

Instinct.

I shifted through the air, thankfully fast without a form, and forced my body into the corporal plane.

Riddle's head whipped up.

I cracked. I burnt—we were not supposed to do this unbidden. But—

But I could touch.

My feet anchored firmly to the ground, one hand wrapped around the hot metal of the safety railing. The other found the back of her t-shirt, damp with sweat, and fisted.

She jerked to a halt. She made no sound, despite the wide earth hovering deadly beneath her.

It was the right decision. Even as my forced presence in the world tore into my stomach, burning up at the tips of my fingers. I could endure, for her.

Ezekiel's power swelled in the air. His eyes found mine, proud and azure. His slender palm raised, outstretched towards Riddle.

"You are a stain on this earth," he said. "I had thought you would understand your lesson after last time, but it would appear not."

Riddle rolled his eyes. I couldn't quite believe it.

"And I'd thought you would've learned to be less pretentious," he said.

"I will not allow you to wreak any further havoc," Ezekiel continued, unfazed.

His power coiled in preparation and things seemed to slow down.

I could feel the tug of gravity on the girl, straining to fall to her death. See the way the weak afternoon sun carved out a mockery of a halo over Riddle's stance. The air glimmered gold with the saturation of Ezekiel's Divinity. A few birds circled curiously overhead.

Why are you laughing?

Riddle stood still, did nothing. I didn't understand it—why did he never seek to save himself?

Ezekiel's power was commendable, befitting a true Right-hand. Riddle could not escape, not once the decision had been made.

White light streamed out from the Archangel in a searing glow. Any Other it touched would be gone—no immortality could stand up to that.

I imagined, for a moment, watching him cease to be, the life in those cunning, soulless eyes disappearing. Never again would I hear that mocking voice in my ear. How much easier would it be, how light would I feel without the weight of his words or inexhaustible arguments?

For a second, I let it pass. And then… well, it seemed instinct was not done with me yet.

I moved, and Ezekiel's light slammed into my chest.

It was sucked up like honey into my heart. For a moment, it was everything I'd ever desired as it weaved into my mind, my ribs, my veins. *So warm and gentle,* I thought, *so pure!*

And then it found that tiny pinprick where my Divinity was missing. The warmth began to intensify.

Ahead, Ezekiel stared at me in horror. No. Not at me. At where my hands were clasped around nothing.

"Brother," he said. His voice was strange.

We heard the impact, even from this high up. A loud, wet, crack.

I realised, as my Divinity began to smoulder and blaze, what I had done. The death of an innocent appeared as terrible black tally on my soul, and Ezekiel's light was already burrowing into me, curious to find the part of me I had once torn off. Now, presented with a meal such as this, it opened his mouth and *hungered.*

"I…" I heard myself say, but it didn't sound like me. It was thin, choked.

Inside of me, something began to dissolve and I abruptly no longer had the strength, or the will, to hold myself up.

The ground met me with a painful slam. I lay there, filled with horror. The world turned blurry.

I'd only wanted to save him.

Ahead of me, a dark figure shot past.

I blinked through the pain, confused at the image that resolved.

Riddle…had Ezekiel in an embrace?

There was an odd, wet ripping noise. My brother screamed.

I suddenly understood, snapped out of my devastation.

It was no embrace. Riddle's arm had disappeared between their bodies, and as he shifted back I saw his hand, blackened and burnt, inside the Archangel's chest. Slowly, his nails dug into my brother's Divinity, and began to tear it free.

I stared. It shouldn't have been possible. Ezekiel was one of our strongest. It should have done more than singe his hand—it should have destroyed him!

"Thomas," he gasped and writhed, "stop!"

But he could do nothing. Under his skin, an odd grey now coloured his veins.

With a final yank, Riddle ripped it free.

My eyes grew wide, disbelieving as he brought that terrible light up to his face. It illuminated every beautiful plane of his features, his eyes now two black pools with a thin ring of metal. The skin of his cheeks began to crackle and redden.

"Riddle!" I cried. But of course, he ignored me.

The sharp line of his jaw unhinged, and his pointed teeth clamped down.

What sounded like a clap of thunder rang out. Blood hit the ground, Riddle's blood—it must have hurt to touch the core of a being so pure.

Gradually, Riddle began to eat my brother.

It was over quickly. The noise faded away as Ezekiel sagged in his hold. Riddle's half-destroyed face began to rapidly rebuild itself. He let the angel drop to the floor and massaged at his throat with black fingers, stretching out his neck.

Metres below, the last few flutters of my child's heart beat like the wings of a tiny bird before stopping. Her life had finally sputtered out.

It felt like mine had too. I stared at the sky in agony. There were no stars in the blue.

What remained of Ezekiel fluttered into the wind like autumn leaves. He was no more. I heard my siblings cry out as they felt the loss. They were coming, but it would be too late.

I wish to die, I prayed to my Father. *I have failed you. Please, have mercy—let me die.*

There was a slow tapping noise, footsteps, and familiar feet filled my vision, so graceful and perfectly formed. Something dripped onto my cheek. Blood, perhaps.

"My dear Harry," Riddle said. His voice was different: deeper, rich with power.

I felt my wings begin to fall apart as I died. "Let me pass in peace," I said.

"Oh no," I heard him laugh. "You don't get to do that now."

*

"...found you..."

"...I promised...Harry..."

"...for me?"

*

I awoke, and cried out.

Pain. Unbearable pain. My chest was scooped dry, a ragged wound where my Divinity once lay. Instead of power and light, I was a cold slab of meat.

Confusion bled into realisation.

Riddle. Ezekiel. My child.

Had my Father heeded my prayer to him? Was this it—was I finally dying? I smiled at the thought, chased down the pain and held it close to me as I burnt.

"Shh," a voice came from above. Fingers stroked through my hair, wiped my tears.

I knew that voice. Something inside me began to gallop, shaking my chest.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Riddle said into my ear.

Our position became suddenly clear to me. I was cradled by Riddle’s body, my back—where something felt so wrong that I shied away from thinking of it—pressed up against his chest. He felt hot and constricting, his arms wrapped around me.

I tried to push him off. I couldn’t. I was weak now, even weaker than when I had taken mortal form.

“Get off me,” I said. I was surprised at the hatred in my voice.

Riddle sighed. I felt his chest move beneath me. “As you wish.”

He released me. And of course, I toppled to the ground. I managed to catch myself on my elbows as they slid along sand.

Sand?

My eyes widened.

I looked around, shocked. We were on a beach. The shore stretched infinitely between East and West. Behind us was sand, forever. In front, the endless ocean. Silky grey waves made no sound as they lapped against the beach. There was no warmth here, no colour.

I looked back to Riddle and struggled to my knees. My spine sagged with the effort.

He looked at me with an odd expression. I couldn’t decide if it was endearment or amusement. I wanted to rip out his eyes.

“How could you?”

I should have asked where we were, why I was here. But it was the only thing I could think to say.

He raised an eyebrow. “How could I what?”

“You killed my brother—my child!” I said.

“Well,” he said. “Technically—”

I cut him off. “And you used me to do it.” I didn’t sound angry now; I sounded devastated, bitter.

He had the decency to look a little more serious. “The angel? Yes, you did provide a timely distraction. But that you were selected as the girl’s guard was mere coincidence.”

“Coincidence! For months you exploited that *mistake* I made—”

The air around us grew abruptly heavy. Power roiled off the being next to me and bore down on the crown of my head until it bowed before him.

It was him—his anger.

For a split second I tried to reach out to my brothers and sisters. But the place I usually called from was gone.

“A mistake,” Riddle repeated.

“It was clearly—”

“Don’t call it that.”

“You are *proving my point*,” I got out.

And the feeling lifted. Air flowed back into our surroundings and I sucked in as much as my lungs could take, thirsty for it.

“You really need to stop taking everything so personally,” Riddle said.

I swallowed my fury and fear and looked down at my knees. My white robes were stained grey and torn, covered in wet grit. I shivered. Around us, the sea stared back blankly.

I would get nowhere like this.

I tried a different tack: “Where are we?“

Something soft brushed my thigh: his wing-tip now covered my shoulder. I tried to shrug it off, but as it didn’t actually rest on me it was quite hard to do so.

“Acheron,” Riddle said.

The word rung in my ears, the implications worming into my mind like a thousand writhing maggots.

“So I have Fallen.”

Riddle nodded. He seemed almost sad. “Yes."

I swallowed back a sob. I knew what this meant. Never again would I see my brothers and sisters. Never again would I bask in His light, for as long as I existed. I was an outcast now. A failure. A mistake.

And if I was in Hell…

“My child,” I thought suddenly to ask, sitting straighter. “She is not here, is she?”

Riddle’s molten metal eyes gave nothing away. “It was still suicide, Harry.”

I felt cold again, despite the heat of his wing. “I see.”

Riddle sighed again. “Come. We can’t dally on the shores of the River of Woe forever.”

“Why not,” I said blankly.

Riddle ignored me and got to his feet. He seemed taller down here. He reached down and dragged me upright. I made no protest—what would be the point?

I swayed where I stood. In front, the sea remained flat, only the tiniest ripples breathing around the shore.

So this was where the Fallen landed—this was Hell? Or, I supposed, the gateway to it at least. I tried to recall what I knew of this place. *The dead must cross the river, enter the first circle.*

“Where do we go from here?” A terrible thought occurred to me. “Is this it?”

I was not dead, not technically; would I be prevented from entering? Stuck here on this forsaken beach for the rest of eternity?

He laughed. “No. We’ll cross the river. Charon is coming.”

"And once we have crossed?" I asked.

Riddle smiled. "Then we are in my domain, little angel.“

“Don’t call me that.”

In an odd response, his head pricked up, like a dog that had scented the air. With narrowed eyes, he looked out at the white of the horizon. I tried to follow his gaze.

Out of the murky, fog-drenched water, a faint shape was making its way towards us.

“Right on time,” Riddle said.

Charon, the Ferryman, was known even to beings like me.

At first I could only make out a small boat—more of a raft—with a lone, slim figure standing at the helm. No sound escaped as he drifted closer, his oar silent as it cut through the water.

As he grew closer and reached the beach, I couldn’t help my stare.

He was bent double, old body so gnarled and withered I would have thought him a tree at first glance, if not for the star-spray of white hair that frothed in wisps from his shrivelled scalp.

He sneered down at us, the entirety of his eyes black, like a goat. “Of course it’s you,“ he grumbled at Riddle, before his gaze dropped to me and he squinted.

After a moment his eyes widened. “My… Charon hasn’t seen one of *you* down here for quite some time." A long, wriggling tongue came out to lick at papery lips. “Charon couldn’t ever forget that taste, you know… so sweet, it was!“

I shrank back, horrified. *He had eaten one of us?*

Riddle was there, a steadying presence that loomed from behind me. He seemed amused.

“A lovely mental image but we do need to get going.” A small golden object flashed through the air as Riddle flicked something towards him. “Passage for us both.”

The Ferryman’s bony hand whipped out to catch it. He stared down at the coin in his palm. Foamy saliva began to eke out from the edges of his mouth. To my surprise, the coin went into his mouth, the crunch audible in the silence as he chewed and swallowed.

"Granted,” Charon said. When he licked his lips, his mouth was stained gold.

Riddle rolled his eyes and strode forward. He grabbed my arm as he went and I stumbled after him.

There was nowhere to sit on the boat and so I stood, my hands gripped around the wooden central mast. Strangely, we sat no lower in the water, the vessel still barely submerged even with our added weight.

Charon reclaimed his place at the helm, and once again picked up his oar. I eyed it, skeptical. It was half-rotten, looked a weak breeze away from falling apart. With a grunt, he plunged it into the water. The stringy muscles on his white arms stood out as he pulled, and the boat began to move.

Soon, the shore disappeared. An impenetrable white mist surrounded us, vision limited to a few feet of grey water lapping at the sides.

The further we went, the colder I began to feel.

The Ferryman’s black eyes never left me, despite his work to pull us forward. He seemed to grow more pleased with every shiver, and his mouth stretched to a smile as I sought to keep my teeth from chattering.

It went on like this for at least a dozen minutes, until I could no longer feel the crumbled wood beneath my fingers. I hated it: even as a mortal, my suffering had always felt muted somehow, by my Divinity. This was just… plain uncomfortable. To distract myself, I looked at the water. The texture was odd; it appeared more a grey sand than a liquid, lit up every now and again as though some silent lightening burnt fathoms below.

I leant over, entranced. How nice it would be, I thought distantly, to sink into it and close my eyes. I wouldn’t have to feel the horrible, pressing guilt, or the pain in my back. I could just make it all *stop*—

A hand closed around my upper arm.

"Don’t,” Riddle said.

Startled, I realised how close my face had been to the surface.

“If you wish to drown, you should let Charon feast first at least,” Charon grumbled.

Riddle fingers tightened imperceptibly. I shivered again, and he frowned.

“You're cold?” he asked. And then, in a lower voice: “Charon.”

The old man harrumphed. Nothing happened for a moment, and then the cold flowed away, replaced by a gentle warmth. It was hard not to sigh with pleasure at the relief of being able to feel my toes.

Had the cold been the old man’s doing?

Riddle let go of me to gesture to the water. “Do you understand why you cannot look?”

Begrudgingly, I shook my head.

He stared at me. “It is the river of Woe. It calls out to pain.”

Ahead, I heard Charon mutter faintly: “Do they teach you nothing up there?" He paired it with a particularly hard thrust of his oar.

I wobbled, and Riddle once again took my shoulder, steadying me.

I shrugged it off. I wanted nothing from him.

Soon, a differentiation of grey materialised in the distance. I looked to Riddle; he didn't seem particularly concerned, profile calm and thoughtful as he stared out in front of us.

”What is that?” I asked.

"'Tis the Edge,” Charon crooned, gleeful.

"A place for those unbaptised by your God,” Riddle translated.

My insides twisted with trepidation. As we drifted closer, the lump on the horizon resolved into what at first glance looked like the fossilised shell of some prehistoric beast. Great mountains of stone reared up out of the earth, their crags and creeks sprinkled with shadows and the occasional withered tree. I wasn’t sure, but I thought I saw a dark shape flit across the rock and disappear.

Charon's mastery over the Acheron delivered us to the shore in what seemed like mere moments. Despite the bleak landscape, it felt good to have ground under my feet again. I was

reminded of Earth, of the bleached, lonely canyons I'd once explored during those days of wandering, when humans did not yet walk the earth.

I half-expected as dramatic a parting as the greeting had been, but no sooner had we stepped off the boat than it began its lonely journey back to the far shore. With no word of goodbye, Charon's spindly figure was swallowed up by the mist. The last thing to disappear were his black eyes, two soulless points in a blanket of white.

"Charming, is he not?" Riddle said when we were alone.

I stared at him. Even with his wings half-hidden, he was a dark focal point in the landscape. It was hard to look away.

“What is he?” I asked.

“The son of Night herself,” Riddle said. “Once, long ago, he tried to gamble with Lucifer, using his soul as collateral. Of course he lost, and ever since has been forced to ferry the dead until he collects enough coin to clear his debt."

I thought of the golden chit disappearing on his tongue, the bob of his throat as he swallowed. What a terrible existence: never setting foot on steady ground, endlessly crossing between two sides of such a bleak and harsh place.

“I see.” I said. I was beginning to feel quite miserable.

A few seconds stretched by

“Look,” Riddle said. “You may as well accept what happened. You’re being a bit of a sore loser.”

My teeth felt sharp in my mouth. I had a new, sudden urge for violence. “Flippancy isn’t going to make this any better.” My eyes felt hot.

He shrugged. “Well—”

“I will never, *never* forgive you for what you have done,” I snapped.

It was almost satisfying, the way his smile fell from his face. “I don’t require your forgiveness."

But now the words rushed out of me, echoed off the stone cliffs. “They will call me *The Betrayer*, my brothers and sisters, do you understand that? I will never see my Father again. They will curse me, up there—”

“Don't blame me for your own actions,” Riddle cut me off. “I never asked you to let her go, I never asked you to step in front of me.”

And the worst of it—the thing that finally had hot, humiliated tears spilling down my cheeks —was that he was right. I couldn’t blame him. It was my fault. Ezekiel’s death. Her death. The fact that I’d lost my siblings a war that we had fought for all existence.

I said nothing whilst he looked at me.

“Don’t,” I said eventually. “Don’t pity me.”

He looked away.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo let's just ignore the names I'm using for angels here... Ezekiel was actually a 6th century BC Hebrew prophet who authored the eponymous Book of Ezekiel. In Hebrew, his name means “God Strengthens” or “Strength of God.”

Acheron is actually a real river in Greece. But in Greek mythology, it's the river of 'pain/woe/lost souls' that separates the living and the dead. Charon (the son of Erebus and Nyx/Night), was tasked with ferrying the souls of the deceased who had received the rites of burial. In payment he received the coin that was placed in the mouth of the corpse.

Purgatory—the Catholic Church holds that "*all who die in God's grace and friendship but still imperfectly purified" undergo the process of purification which the Church calls purgatory, "so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven*". So I think the unbaptised would technically go to limbo? But I didn't want to complicate it

Wishing: A Dangerous Sport

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I couldn't weep forever. Well, I probably could, I thought glumly. After all, that sounded like something possible in a place like Hell.

Up ahead, Riddle led the way through the rocks. The great muscles in his bare back—for he only wore black trousers, despite the cold—looked tense, which did make me feel a bit better.

What am I doing? I thought bleakly. Trailing after Riddle in what I presumed was Purgatory, whilst without me, back on earth, the peripeteia was slowly lost. I felt aimless, hopeless. What was it that I was supposed to do here?

"Keep up," Riddle called. He'd paused to wait for me. My body was weak, and my feet struggled for balance on the terrain.

I recalled, with great fondness, the vast majority of our friendship, when I had unquestionably been the more powerful.

"Where are we going?"

"We need to cross through," he said.

"Where are all the souls?" What about that shadow I'd seen as we approached the shore?

Riddle snorted. "You mean you haven't noticed?"

Noticed what? The only thing around us, as far as the eye could see, was rock.

I was so caught up in glaring at him that my foot managed to catch on something. I stumbled and had to throw out a hand to catch myself on a nearby crag.

My teeth ground together as he laughed.

"No, you haven't, have you? How *indecent* you are Harry."

"Indecent?" I repeated, confused.

He stared at my hand, at where it gripped onto the curve of a rock. I followed his gaze.

I flinched back; it was no rock I was clutching. It was a statue of a female, limbs contorted into strange, unnatural angles so that her body formed a horrifying cube shape. Half of her—her face, her chest and a single leg—was rendered in breathtaking detail. The rest seemed like unfinished blocks of rock, like Michelangelo's *non-finito*s.

Riddle's words suddenly made sense as I realised where, exactly, I had gripped.

My cheeks flamed. "What is this?"

Riddle looked like he was trying not to smile. "I told you before. The unbaptised."

His meaning trickled down.

"You mean to say that she is a soul?"

He nodded.

It began to dawn on me. I looked at the cliffs behind us. Near the shore we had come from, I felt confident to say that the rocks were just rocks. There was nothing to suggest the human form. But the further in one walked, the more the cliffs began to resemble a jumble of humanoid figures, until here, where we stood, there were half a dozen or so faces I could spot, that I had previously mistaken for interesting structures in the rock.

I looked on. Ahead of us, a great boulder suddenly unlocked itself: a tessellation of bodies, some completely smooth, having slumbered for too long, others half-merged, and others still wholly visible, pallor leaking grey and limbs sinking.

I felt sick. "Can they feel?"

"Yes," Riddle said. “They try not to, but they can."

I turned back to the female. My eyes met hers, immobilised in stone with a sightless gaze up at the bleak sky. The pupil twitched.

“How did this happen?“ My voice was faint.

"I imagine the sheer time,” he replied casually. “What would you do if you were here, in this place, for hundreds of thousands of years? There's no night here, no change in the surroundings. I imagine you might last a few hundred years, but eventually you'd have to give up, no? Find somewhere to settle, try to become as still as you could, pray for the time to pass on without you."

"But souls must journey through here all the time, on their way to other parts—as we are?"

"It doesn't matter. Those condemned here can't see any but themselves."

I stared at the sleeping landscape, at the dead, petrified in ossification. It stretched on endlessly, as far as I could see.

My heart ached. “This is ungodly.”

"Oh Harry," Riddle said, like I'd pleased him, "who do you think sends them here?"

We walked the rest of the way in silence. It seemed Riddle was as lost in thought as I, as he said nothing and only barely bothered to glance behind to check I followed.

The path we took weaved through cliffs in an elegant, complicated squiggle, until finally it led through a darkened cave into the rock itself.

Light stamped its way onto dimpled stone, the ceiling and corners swallowed by an impenetrable darkness. I smelled salt in the air, heard water splash against the rocks and saw it disappear into the gloom. I glanced back out at the opening, where shadows cradled the rocky outline of the white sky.

There was no going back now.

“Stay close to me.” Riddle’s voice echoed even deeper here.

I dutifully shuffled forward until I felt the heat from his body on my skin. Together we strode out into the blackness.

We did not walk for long in the cave. Ten minutes, perhaps, enough for the light to thin to the barest whisper.

And then the shadows began to move.

Riddle halted. A smile played at his lips, like he was amused by something.

“Knock knock,” he called.

“Very funny,” rumbled a voice to my left. The gloom swelled and abruptly the darkness resolved into shapes.

It was hard not to hold my breath in fear.

Four great wolves sat in front of a hole in the floor. They were clearly no ordinary wolves, much larger than their counterparts on Earth. Their pelts were sleek wisps of writhing shadow, and they had no eyes that I could discern, just wide, gaping mouths of thorny teeth beneath their snouts.

Riddle flapped his hand. “Get out of the way,” he said.

Three of the wolves immediately scarpered off to the side, where the shadows all but swallowed them from sight.

The one that remained took its time getting to its feet. It licked a paw with a red, pointed tongue.

“A please wouldn’t go amiss,” it growled, with a voice so deep I felt it in my collarbones. It was the one who had spoken before.

The other wolves seemed to give it a look of disbelief. I wasn’t quite sure how I knew that, considering they had no eyes with which to look.

“Do you enjoy guarding the gate this much Fenrir?” Riddle said sweetly. “Shall I extend your punishment for another thousand years?”

The wolf—Fenrir—froze. Its hackles raised before it slunk slowly out of the way.

“Point taken,” it said. And then tacked on a slightly begrudging “Master.”

Riddle snorted.

And then, in a move that truly horrified me, he grabbed hold of my hand, and in three quick steps took us right over the edge of the hole.

It was strange to flip from the sensation of plummeting down to the sensation of stepping forward. My arms windmilled as we burst through, and I would have tipped and fallen if Riddle hadn’t thrown out an arm to grab my waist.

I looked around. I didn’t really understand where we’d gone. *What came on the other side of Purgatory?*

Black marble walls towered on either side of us and stretched up until they disappeared into the mist. Words were carved into surface, repeated over and over: ‘*spem omnem desere, qui huc intras’*.

There was no choice for us but to go forward I saw, to follow the narrow path that they funnelled us down.

Riddle released me. “You’re funny like this,” he said, I presumed in relation to my sudden clumsiness.

“Why don’t *you* try having your wings torn from you?”

He raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t sound like fun.”

“No," I said, "it doesn’t, does it?"

“Well you should be thankful one of us still has them.”

I looked at him.

“What? You don’t want to have to walk there do you? It’s much quicker like this.”

“Like what?“

My question turned into a yelp as his arms wrapped underneath my legs and he lifted me up. I froze. Faint embarrassment curdled through me. Was the indignity of this strange new form never going to end?

“This is humiliating,” I told him.

This close I could see how his eyelashes glittered with metal, the inhuman glow to his cheeks as he smiled and rolled his eyes. He bent his knees and appeared to brace for something. My

arms clutched around his neck for balance.

"There there. I'm sure you'll survive."

I almost choked.

"Sorry, was that insensitive?" he said mildly, and launched us into the air.

Black flashed around us as his wings appeared and unfurled. They stretched out, beautiful and sleek, their span impressive, and gave a single mighty beat.

We soared. Wind ran cool, refreshing fingers through my hair. We moved quickly; three more wingbeats and the marble walls fell below. They stretched out in a peculiar knot and all of a sudden I understood it for what it was: a maze.

"Well, anyway," he continued, "it's not like you're actually dead."

"And yet I woke on the shore of Hell and had no choice but to cross the Acheron."

"You Fell," Riddle explained. "You may take the same journey as a mortal soul, but you are something very different."

Beneath us, the walls disappeared as we were swallowed by the mist. Pressed to Riddle as I was, I could almost imagine his wings were my own, his power mine. It also gave me some much needed warmth; up here, the ever-present coldness was worse. And I was cold in my heart too. My anger had left me empty. As his wings beat magnificently around us, my eyes burned. My shoulder blades hurt with a terrible pain.

I was so fed up of having to feel these feelings!

I remembered my plea to my Father. How I had asked to be destroyed, and he had not the mercy to even grant me that…

"You say I'm not dead," I was surprised at the flatness of my voice. "Why? Why would He keep me?"

"Why does He do anything?" he said.

"Leaving me like this is cruel," I said without thinking. "I asked Him to die."

The muscles in Riddle's arms tightened around me in sudden constriction.

"You did what?" The question was lethally quiet. I could usually forget he was *Other*. Now I remembered: this was no angel, with their fingers clamped around my thighs.

My throat suddenly went dry. "You don't think it would have been a mercy?"

He seemed confused. "True death?

"It's what I wanted," I said, honestly. Stupidly.

The sound of Riddle's wings suddenly cut off. For a second we hovered, static in the air.

And then he dragged me out in front of him until I dangled like a doll.

"Riddle!" I gasped as gravity pulled at me, only stopped by his bruising grip. My legs kicked futilely as my hands reached out for him.

"I never took you for suicidal," he spat. "But by all means."

He let me go.

I dropped like a stone. At first, I was too surprised to make any sound. And then I suppose I must have screamed, but the wind tore it away.

He'd *let me go*—just like that?

The betrayal was quickly overtaken by sheer panic. Above, I could just make him out as he watched me fall, wings spread like a huge black crow. And then I blinked and he had disappeared into the mist.

"Riddle!" I cried out.

The muscles in my back burned afresh as they tried to extend limbs I no longer had. My heart leapt to my throat as I hurtled down and down, spinning and twisting, breath ripped from my lungs.

I don't know how long I fell, seconds or minutes, but suddenly I saw green; a huge dark forest that reared up beneath me.

I had mere moments to appreciate it, to think: *he'd really done it, after so many thousands of years, he'd really* killed *me—*

And then I slammed into the tree cover.

Branches hit me like clubs as I fell through, leaves (so delicate, I had always thought) now sliced at my skin in a thousand tiny cuts. There was nothing I could do but cry out and take it.

The earth, when I finally reached it, slammed into me like the punch from a mighty fist.

It took a while for my lungs to start working again. Wetness trickled down my forehead and stung my eyes as they opened. The blurry canopy above remained mockingly still, only interrupted by the occasional delayed branch fall.

Riddle, I thought vengefully as I gathered the courage to move my legs. I wondered if he could still hear when I thought of him and tried to summon as much anger as possible.

When I wiped my mouth, my hand came away streaked crimson, but somehow I wasn't as hurt as I'd thought. There was truth to what he said: I was no dead mortal.

I heaved onto my side and managed to slowly get to my feet. So where had he left me?

I looked around at what seemed to be a perfectly ordinary human forest. Tall, thick trees stretched gnarled fingers up to a leafy ceiling, penetrated at odd intervals by dribbling threads of pale light. It was old and wild, the ground a mess of rotting leaves and twisted roots. In places they were coiled so densely that, disturbed, I almost thought them to look like intestines in the cavern of a torso. My skin prickled at the quiet. There was no hum of insects, no rustle of wind in the trees...

Which meant that when something in the thicket moved, I heard it immediately.

I gritted my teeth and limped determinedly towards the sound. There was someone there, I was sure of it. It was a win-win in my view: either they would either help me to escape this place or assist me in my desired demise.

My palms slapped against crumbling bark as I used the trees to support my weight. Somehow the figure in front was slower and less graceful that I was (even with my injuries!), and they kept banging noisily into the surrounding branches.

“Wait!” I called out as they disappeared out of sight.

My breath came quick, but I sped up. A few seconds later and I rounded the last tree, stepping straight out into a small grassy clearing.

I stared.

There were a half a dozen of them. Each dressed in odd scraps of fur and and pelts, normal mortal figures aside from...

Aside from their heads, which had been attached to their bodies *facing the wrong direction.*

And they had seen me.

They couldn’t run as quick as I. Five of them managed to flee as I launched myself towards them, but one was not quick enough.

I managed to catch his shoulder and grip on, turning him around to face me. “Please, I just want to talk!”

It was odd, I must admit, to look into a face that bobbed above shoulder blades. He was a strange creature, thin and child-like and with eyes so watery and blue that the iris wept into the white. Spiny antlers stretched out from his bare scalp, like winter-stripped branches, the colour of old bone.

His expression didn’t change, although he trembled under my hand. “We have to leave the clearing,” he mumbled. His language was one I recognised, one that hadn’t been used for eons.

“Just—wait. Can you tell me, please, where is this place?”

His mouth opened to display small, sharp teeth, like flecks of flint. “It is Hell, Harry.”

I recoiled when I heard my name. “…You know of me?”

He shifted uneasily. “Yes, I knew you would come.”

“But… *how?*”

I noticed the shadows move. The rest of them watched us, hidden in the surrounding trees.

“I have to tell you something,” the antlered man said.

And then a cry split the air.

It was a terrible ear-piercing shriek, loud and shrill enough that my hands slapped over my ears in reflex. The man reared back, looking around wildly.

“Tell me what?” I tried, but he was no longer listening.

A rush of air buffeted past us, howling through the trees. A foul stench came with it and another shriek.

“We have to *go*,” the antlered man said shakily.

He didn’t have to tell me twice. We stumbled together, back towards the cover of the branches. I heard the others cry out as they tripped over each other in panic. None could see where they were going, and their steps were clumsy and faltering.

“What is that?” I asked, afraid.

He shook his head. “There is no time.”

That same, terrible scream rang out again, closer now. But this time there were words too:

"A tasty surprise—I’ll pluck out your eyes—stop you telling lies—enjoy your little cries!"

The back of my neck went cold. We dove behind a wide tree trunk. I pressed my back to it and tried to be still, but my heart hammered so loudly I was afraid it would be heard.

Voices floated out. "Over there, Mistress, please, please have mercy! Something tasty has come, it hides from you. Over there, we promise!”

I swallowed. Whoever ‘Mistress’ was, she didn’t sound like someone I wanted to meet.

The antlered man leant to my ear, his murmur barely more than a breath. He smelled oddly sweet, like dead flowers. “She is here, Harry,” he said. “Your child.”

It felt like time froze. Like I was suddenly suspended in ice.

“You must find her. You can help her leave this place and all will be right.”

I was too shocked to keep my voice low. “Where? Where is she?"

It was a mistake.

The smell of rot filled my nostrils, and something stepped out from behind our tree.

I hadn’t heard her come closer, and I understood why: she didn't walk, she *flowed*, steps graceful and dainty as she moved towards us. Long black hair rippled like water down her spine and over her bare breasts, long enough to brush her thighs. Two owl-like black eyes—like Charon’s—shone from behind an sharp, curved beak.

“**Why are you hiding from me?”** A thousand voices spoke.

I forgot my child. I forgot everything but the need to *run.*

But my body did not move an inch, even when she reached out towards me. Slowly, sharp black nails entered my field of vision and caressed my cheek.

”**Now you, little one,”** she said, **“you don't smell like the dead**.”

She smiled as my chest heaved with my breaths. Her fingers walked up to my hair to play with the strands.

Move, Harry. *Move!*

"**No… you aren't, are you?**" Her hand tightened in my hair until my scalp burned.

She ripped me away from the tree, away from the antlered man who had stood as unmoving as I.

"**Don't think I don't know**,” she said. Her beak tickled my neck. “**Where you have come from**.”

“Let me go,” I gasped, still arrogant enough to believe she might listen.

“**But I’m so hungry,**” she explained, and then thrust her beak into my chest.

I don’t know what it was that she tore from me in great, scissoring pecks. It wasn’t flesh, or blood, or bone, but something different. Something more integral than that. It felt like she was eating the very core of me. It was nonsensical: her beak disappeared into my ribs, and I saw her jaw work. Felt the pain of it. But my skin remained pale and unbroken.

I didn’t think there was a time in my existence that I had ever felt so terrified. This time there would be no other form waiting for me, no wash of peace as I left my mortal body. What would happen if I died here? Would I be stuck in this awful, backwards place forever?

But you wanted this, a voice crept into my head. *It’s like you told him, you want to die!*

But my child! I told it. *My child is here, she needs me!*

It didn't matter. I was, for the first time, truly helpless.

The agony stretched on, indefinite. I didn't know how much time I bore her tearing at me.

It was only right when I had given up any hope of salvation that he appeared.

Of course he did: this moment was practically written into beings like him. The moment of weakness, of surrender. He even looked hungry, when I gazed past the head of hair hovering over my chest and saw him. His form solidified, woven together by threads of shadow until he stood there, watching.

"Well?" he said eventually. "Is this the graveyard you wanted?"

The creature's head snapped up and I could have cried with relief.

She sucked up the last piece of whatever it was that she had been eating like a thin, wet noodle. "**My Lord**."

Around us, the other backwards figures went mad. They began to scream, knocking into each other in their haste to flee. It was worse that when the woman had arrived, their movements so frenzied that it sounded like a storm had been caught in the trees.

Riddle's eyes didn't leave mine. "No, no, Harpy," he said. "Please, continue. This is what he wants."

I was incredulous.

The monster above contorted her jaw in what I believed to be a smile. "**As you wish, my Lord.**"

"Wait—" but the word had barely left my mouth when it began again.

Pain. White-hot, insufferable—

"Is this not what you wanted?" Riddle said.

He bent over me. The woman grew tense but continued her meal. Tenderly, he tucked a lock of sweaty hair behind my ear. I could see the way he fed on my suffering.

"Is this not what you prayed for?"

If I'd have had anything other than desperation within me, I would have told him that I wished for an end to my suffering, to my guilt and self-recrimination: that I wished for *sleep*, not pain. But all I was capable of was a single word.

"*Please.*"

But it seemed a single word was all I needed.

The pain stopped. I lay there and panted. Once again stared up at the monolithic canopy above. I was so, so tired. And hurt. But at least that terrible weight had left my chest.

“Please?” he questioned.

I turned my head. A shape lay on the ground next to me. Black eyes stared at me from a jagged, bodiless neck. It was her head—he’d pulled it clean off.

“You were right… I don’t want to die.” It was all I could bring myself to say. This was a lesson. He had done this to me as a twisted form of teaching.

“I didn’t think so.” Satisfaction coloured his words.

I was too exhausted to respond. I was limp as he picked me up again, his arms folded under my thighs. I couldn’t even get my hands to loop around his neck like last time: now they pooled uselessly in my lap.

He straightened up, and began to walk back towards the clearing I had fled from. As we passed the head, he gave it a casual kick into the weeds.

I peered over the gentle sway of his shoulder. In the shadow of the trees, that strange backwards form stared back. The antlered man nodded at me. I remembered his words, the hope he had given me.

Riddle shifted me to a better position and I blinked away. He mustn't find out.

“What did she feed on,” I asked wearily, aiming to distract. “Inside me?”

Riddle's eyes slid down to my sternum. "Your soul."

My aghast expression must have been more obvious than I’d thought as he went on. “It replenishes as soon as you rest,” he explained. “You’ll heal.”

“Every time?”

He nodded. "That’s the worst thing about this place. It doesn’t deal with weeks or years; it deals with eternity. Most things become unbearable when they are stretched out ad infinitum."

I summarised: any pain, any suffering could continue forever. Unlike the mortal realm, there would be no end to it here.

I bit my lip, sickened. “So she would have kept going."

“Well, she probably would have stopped at some point. You may have Fallen but you were still once an angel; your soul is harder to break than most.”

We had reached the clearing. The sky above loomed in a circle of white, hacked out of the gloom of the forest. I heard the whisper of feathers as he prepared to fly.

“Where to now?” Another stop on this merry-go-round introduction to Hell, I imagined. I didn’t care though. Now that I was safe—of sorts—there was only one thing that filled my mind.

She must be protected, for our way to prevail, Ele had said.

And if there was a chance for me to save her… perhaps I could still fulfil my duty, even in a place as wretched as this. It was a heady, drug-like thought.

“My home,” said Riddle, gleeful, and launched us up.

Chapter End Notes

Fenrir is the great wolf in Norse Mythology who breaks free from his chains at Ragnarök, the twilight of the gods, kills Odin, and is then killed by Odin's son Vidarr.

spem omnem desere, qui huc intras = abandon all hope that you enter here (of course from Dante)

No Rest for the Wicked

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I'm ashamed to say that I don't know how we reached Riddle's place of rest. One moment I was cradled to him, sick with fear at being air-borne once again, and the next I was opening groggy eyes, confused.

A huge clock tower consolidated out of the mist ahead, each of the roman numerals stretched to the length of a house. Beneath, glimpses of an old, half-decayed city flashed by, the elegant buildings soot-stained and twisted together. It looked curiously like a kind of mutated 20th century London.

"He wakes," Riddle said dryly. I felt the vibrations of his voice in his chest, pressed to my ear.

I was too weary to feel humiliated. "You live here?"

"Sometimes," came the response.

Each beat of his wings drew us closer, until the face of the clock filled my vision like a great white moon. Camouflaged in its centre was a small marble platform that led into the tower itself, and it was here that we sped towards.

Our landing was smooth. Riddle's wings sheathed themselves as his feet met the floor, the transition from flying to walking barely noticeable. His bare feet slapped against the the ground as we followed the platform inside.

Why a clock tower? I wanted to ask, *why here?* But Riddle's face had turned solemn with thought.

Inside was at least a little warmer than the air had been. It was brighter too, more akin to the mortal Earth I had left behind. The entrance led to a great hallway, where a shining chessboard floor stretched ahead, the walls on either side a series of grand arches that shrunk in the distance until I could no longer make them out.

Then I looked up.

An extravagant fresco featuring overly-bucolic cherubs, rolling clouds and worshipful mortals greeted my eyes, and I couldn't help the surprised "Oh," that fell from my lips.

"Hm?"

"You have scenes of heaven—" I didn't quite know how to express it.

"It's cute, isn't it?" Riddle said.

“Cute,” I repeated.

I didn’t have long to stare at it. We took an abrupt right, into another hallway. It looked exactly the same as the first: still the same infinite row of arches. My legs swayed over the grip of Riddle’s arm and it somehow only occurred to me then that I was being carried like a child.

My fingers curled into his shoulder. “Put me down,” I said.

“No,” Riddle said.

“*Riddle.*”

He had the audacity to ignore me—*me!* Had I been myself, he would have been shackled on the floor for this. But there was nothing I could do but silently fume.

Fortunately, I was interrupted after a minute or so by the sudden cry of a child’s voice.

“My Lord! My Lord!”

Riddle sighed but didn’t stop walking as a small, dark figure came barrelling through one of the arches. A young boy, I thought at first, dressed in a tiny black suit, with a thick notebook in his hand. As he came closer, I revised my categorisation. He was no boy, no mortal boy at least. He was crafted entirely from shadow.

“My Lord!” he wheezed excitedly. Large glasses slipped down on the black oval of his face. “You have returned—*Ah!*”

He had caught sight of me.

“Yes?” Riddle prompted.

The boy was frozen. It embarrasses me to admit that I was quite pleased with his reaction. It was nice to know I still had some gravitas, even like this.

“But— but my Lord!” he whispered. “It’s one of *them*!”

“I’m quite aware of that,” Riddle said dryly, and stepped past him. “Now what is it that you want?”

The shadow pushed his glasses up again before he cleared his throat. If he had eyes I’m sure they would have been narrowed in my direction. “The Dukes are sulking, My Lord, you have yet to approve the budget for the Defoe Crisis. If you can just look at the executive summary here—”

Riddle’s head twitched, his hands occupied with me, and the boy’s notebook burst into flame.

“Oh!” he squeaked, and dropped it onto the tiled marble, where it promptly disintegrated to ash. “My *Lo—ord!*” he whined.

I looked up. Riddle—the demon who had just single-handedly decided the peripeteia—was clearly trying not to smirk. “Give it to Zeb,” he said. “I’m busy and I don’t want to.”

“But—” the shadow-boy looked at me again and swallowed. “As you wish, my Lord.”

He stayed put, hunched over the remains of his notebook, and watched us as we strode away. I almost felt sorry for him.

“Christ I hate politics,” Riddle sighed as we turned through another arch into yet another identical hallway.

I glared, unimpressed with his choice of words.

“What?”

“I didn’t think you would *have* politics in Hell,” I said. *“My Lord*.”

He laughed. “Of course politics ends up in Hell, Harry." He winked. "We have an entire floor dedicated to bureaucrats.”

The next archway we turned through led to a shorter corridor with a single black door at the end. I wondered briefly why his house was so confusing, and then realised it was probably intentional. The ever-present fog, the monolithic rocky cliffs, the black maze, an endless, dark forest… all of these places were made so that unless one knew exactly where to go, escape was all but impossible.

Very on-brand.

The door swung open with no touch as we approached it, and we stepped into a single, cavernous room.

It almost reminded me of a dragon’s lair in the story books my child had read. I didn’t know where to look first: shelves filled every wall, and burst with colour and texture. A thousand books, odd, gleaming trinkets, rusted jewellery, paintings, things I didn’t quite have the vocabulary to even explain. Flora—which I was sure had been outlawed by my kind 20,000 years ago—sprouted from the ceiling in dark, damp places. Great arched windows split one of the walls, displaying a dusk that I knew was somewhere else entirely.

I understood it to be a bedroom from only two things: a bed, wide enough for ten, and in one corner, a large square pool for bathing. I shook my head in disbelief as I caught sight of a huge, segmented golden sun propped up against the side of the pool, as large as a bear. "That's supposed to be thousands of miles under the Atlantic.”

“Well it’s not like anyone is going to notice it missing then,” Riddle said.

I narrowed my eyes. We were walking towards it, did he mean to show me close-up? A vague suspicion formed in my mind.

“Let me down,” I said immediately.

He ignored my struggles. “I will,” he smirked, “in three…two…”

“*Riddle—*”

A great wave rose up and washed out the side of the pool as I was promptly deposited in the water. For a moment it was icy cold, and the shock drove the breath from my lungs. And then something must have happened as it abruptly turned warm and began to steam.

I spluttered to the surface. The water that had overflown ran back, seemingly of its own accord, sucked up by the turquoise tiles of the bath.

“What are you doing?” I half-screeched. My robes were more rags at this point, and they floated up in the water around me like mottled grey ghosts.

“You need to bathe,” he replied, eyebrows raised.

“You don’t just *throw someone in a pool!*”

“Here,” he said. He gestured to where soap had appeared on the side, a muslin pouch filled with fragrant lavender and oil.

My cheeks burned. I was one of the first made by my Father. And now I was being told to bathe, like an unruly child, by a being that was younger than I?

“Oh come on,” he said as he settled himself into an elegant chair that I was sure hadn’t been there before. “You stink of Acheron’s dead and the Eighth. I’m doing you a favour.”

I knew I smelled. I just didn’t want it pointed out, and certainly not by him. But, I supposed, refusing to clean myself would just further reinforce this horrible parental dynamic.

I jerkily stripped out of the cling of my robes, refusing to look at him. As soon as they were no longer touching me, the wet fabric sank like stones to the bottom where they vanished from sight. I found myself glad the water came to chest level, and then felt a bit ridiculous, to be suddenly so self-conscious.

After a moment, I remembered what he had said. “Eighth? Do you mean the Eighth Circle?”

He nodded.

I decided to put aside my humiliation in favour of gaining information. “So those backwards people…” I thought back to my lessons, eons ago. “Fortune Tellers?” I guessed.

“Yep. Looked forward too far in life.”

“And so now they look backwards in death.”

“Yes, well, Hell does have a sense of humour.”

I'm sure my face illustrated that I did not agree with the idea.

I grabbed the soap with a sigh and began to strip away the grime and sweat from my skin. As annoying as I found it, the hot, fragrant water *was* soothing, especially to the tender parts of my upper back. Up until now I'd avoided thinking about it, hadn't dared to touch. But now was as good a time as any. I couldn't put it off forever.

Tentative and awkward, I reached behind, fearful of what I would find.

A hand caught my wrist.

"Not yet," Riddle said quietly.

I ignored him. I pulled my hand away and pressed it to my shoulder blade. I'm sure I didn't breathe as I skirted the strange, lumpy texture beneath my fingertips. My mental picture resolved: I had two, tear-shaped scars right over where my wings had once met my body.

My hand fell and I sank down in the water. I was glad my face was already wet.

I had been disgraced. Demoted. It felt like someone had reached into my chest and grabbed ahold of my heart, like Ezekiel must have felt, when Riddle—

"There are ways to reclaim them." His voice was quiet. Almost gentle.

I shook my head, listened to the splash of the water. "It's my punishment," I said hollowly.

He sighed, and leant forward on his chair, propping his elbows on his knees. "Don't you think you've been punished enough?"

Did I?

I closed my eyes. I was tired, so tired. I thought back to what Riddle had said, that I needed to rest to heal my soul. I hadn't realised it would come on so quickly, this insistent urge to sleep. There was so much I still needed to think about. Namely: did I trust the words of a condemned Fortune Teller? I supposed the fact that he made it to Hell probably meant that he at least was no charlatan. I had to think that his words had been truth anyway, I had no other choice. But how was I to find my child in a place I could not traverse by myself, full of all manner of terrible creatures who wanted nothing more than to feast on me for all eternity?

Something brushed my shoulder. I didn't have the energy to flinch. Instead I creaked open an eyelid, the tiny movement taking far too much effort.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Cleaning you up," came the reply.

He knelt next to the pool, the soap-pouch much smaller in his broad hand than it had been in mine. I hadn't even heard him pick it up from the water. Softly, he pressed it to my shoulder, my neck, swiped at the grime there. The soft scent of camomile and lavender filled the air.

It should have sickened me, to be touched like this by him. It was selfish, I knew, and weak. I should have pushed him away. But Hell thus far had been nothing but pain and fear, and I was raw with it.

Gentle pressure stroked over my face, my upper body, my legs. It was slower, halting as it skirted my back, careful not to touch the fresh scars there.

I don't know how much time passed. My mind skipped only rarely into consciousness, before it fluttered down again.

Eventually though, hands slipped under my body, lifted me up out of the water. Relaxed, as I was, it was easy to obey the shushing noise, to nose into a smoky, nostalgic scent. The world swayed, and then my body met the warmth of a soft, comfortable surface.

Briefly, I wondered why he did this. Why he had saved me at all. Was it guilt? Some misplaced form of reparation, for the time I had healed him? Or was it just because he thought it fun?

Probably the latter I mused, and then my mind slipped softly away.

*

I woke to the sound of voices.

Pain filtered in, diffused like ice through my blood. It was a tired, dull kind of pain, the kind that wraps around you and drags you down, lets you sink into it and close your eyes. I almost did, actually. Almost—but then a low, familiar tone cut through and my mind jumped to attention. It was instinctual.

You need to watch out, something told me. *Danger.*

Memories drifted back, dragging a cold fury in their wake. I'd let him bathe me. Touch my skin, clean me, carry me to bed like a sleepy child. I'd *allowed* this. As one of the oldest beings in this universe, as a creature that breathed life into hurricanes, erected mountains with a sweep of my hand.

No, I decided. No, I may be different now, without my power, but I would not lie here whilst the world around me fell.

I opened my eyes.

A black shape hulked at the end of the room, near the door. The voices came from the hall outside, where at least three shadowy figures like the boy from before clutched white slips of paper and whispered furiously.

Riddle spoke again. "…afraid not," I caught. "He will have to make do until tomorrow."

One of the shadows made the mistake of thrusting what appeared to be a notebook at him. “But my Lord!” it pleaded, a girl’s voice.

The ground trembled, I even felt it through the bed.

The notebook exploded into the air. The shadows trilled and bleated in fear, knocking into each other as they fled, and with no touch, the door slammed shut.

The room sank into a sulky silence.

“They woke you.” Riddle said without turning around. He sounded displeased.

Good. I would take any displeasure.

“They are your servants?” I asked. My elbows shook as I dragged my unwilling body up to a seated position.

He turned to stare at me. “They’re very… persistent, at times.”

“What did they want?”

“It’s not important,” he said.

“It sounded important.” I countered. And then thought about it. “Are you a Duke?”

He snorted. “God no, I’m too young for that.”

He had a point; I hadn’t heard of a new Duke for thousands of years. The last one I knew of had been inaugurated before I’d first met him, when he was still a child.

“Well how old *are* you?” I asked, a bit petulant.

“Why all the questions this morning, hm?” He stalked towards the bed, past the pool, past the statues, past the strange plants. It had my heart rate rising, my body growing tense.

“You’re the only familiar thing in this place,” I said, as calmly as I could. “Of course I wish to understand you.”

“I see,” he said. He was close now, close enough to walk his fingers, spider-like over the silk sheets pooled at the end of the bed.

Another wave of exhaustion crashed over me. I suspected it was the proximity to his power. Perhaps it was intentional, perhaps not. My eyelids fluttered like wings as my elbows shook and then gave out, depositing me back into the pillows. I lay there as my head span, and the first seed of fear sprouted.

Would I be like this forever?

“Be patient,” Riddle said, remarkably prescient. “It’s as I said, your soul still needs to heal.”

“How long will it take?” I asked.

His eyes ran over the length of my body under the sheet. Assessing me. “I could speed it up,” he said slowly.

Of course he could. He could heal me with a snap of his fingers. But he hadn’t.

“…in return for what?”

“I see you’re a quick learner.” He was pleased.

I stared up at him. What could I bargain? What power did I have here—what did he want from me? My mouth opened, and shut again. I had nothing. Truly—he had the peripeteia, my Divinity was gone, my power no more.

Riddle snorted. “Maybe not so quick…”

That rankled me. “What is it, exactly, that you want?”

“I want a great many things, Harry.” I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “But from you…” A grin lay trapped between his teeth. “I want to see you fly again.”

My heart thudded to a cold stop. “What?”

He leant forward, a knee propped on the bed. He loomed over me but I couldn’t bring myself to move.

“I’ll seed your wings,” he said, reading my face, “if you ask me to.”

It all clicked into place.

Sweat crawled down my back like a centipede. I found my throat too dry to swallow. He wanted me to seed myself with *evil?* With something the Others *stole* to mock His first creations?

“Oh come now. It is not quite so bad as they would have you believe.”

“You are of Hell,” I said. Well—croaked.

“Correct.”

“Then I would be damning myself even further to defy the penalty of my actions.”

Riddle gave me a look that showed he was distinctly unimpressed. “Don’t you ever get tired of trying to martyr yourself?”

“What you suggest is an abomination.”

He shrugged, muscles bunching. “I’m not forcing you to do anything, just laying out my terms.”

“Well I don’t accept them,” I said. I’m not sure how well I managed to remain calm.

You are an infuriating, persistently awful *creature*, I thought silently.

Thankfully, he leaned back. “I understand,” he said and then gave me a polite smile. “Well, Harry, if that will be all…”

A sudden fear gripped me. I didn’t want him to leave. As much as I hated it, he was my only source of—well, safety? Influence?

“Wait,” I blurted out, casting around for something to use. “Can we… return to the Eighth soon? When I’ve recovered?”

He went still. Cocked his head in question. “Why?”

“I spoke to some of the Tellers after you dropped me.” He didn’t look guilty, even though I’d reminded him on purpose. “They interested me, I want to learn more.”

“You spoke with them?”

“I wanted to see if I could help.”

“Of course you did,” he said, amused. “But no, we can’t.”

“Why not? I thought you were free to roam this place as you pleased?”

“Oh I am. But you can’t talk to them again," he said slowly, "because they’re dead.”

In all honesty, it took me a few moments to comprehend what he had said. I was still adjusting to this form, the way all of my reactions were now so horribly *physical*. I don’t know how else to describe it—but it felt like my stomach had shrivelled up into a small, dry ball. That boy… the one link I had to her… and Riddle had snuffed it out.

“What?” My voice was a whisper.

He looked at me, all beauty and innocence. “Isn’t that what would be best, an end to their suffering? I thought you’d be pleased.”

Putting aside the mentally draining question of how one killed a being that was already dead, I focused on my anger. “You killed them?”

He smile and nodded.

I didn’t know what to say. “Why?”

“Didn’t want them to start bleating out to whoever deigned to listen that I was ferrying a Fallen around. I don’t like loose ends.”

“*I’m* a loose end."

“Gosh Harry, we really need to work on your self-esteem.” He backed away from the bed with a grin, probably wisely. If I could have moved more I’m sure I would have done something most ungracious. Instead the only thing I could do was glare. “And anyway, they were the ones to call the Harpy on you, you know.”

So he had been watching.

“That—”

“You’re tired,” he cut me off. “For now just stay put and rest. I’ll be back shortly. Remember, there are all sorts of horrible creatures outside who see you as nothing more than a tasty snack. Best you stay here for now.”

If only I could have wiped the smile off his face.

“Where are you going?” I said.

He winked. “It’s a secret.”

The shadows painted around the room rose up in a wave of darkness and slinked towards him. It took no time at all for them to fold themselves around him, until he was nothing more than a dissolving black stain that sucked itself down to a point and disappeared.

And he was gone.

So I lay there, with my shaking hands, and I thought.

I was stuck in this situation. So what did I want from it?

Well, that was obvious: to find the peripeteia and send her back to the mortal world.

And if I was honest with myself, my only hope to do that was through Riddle. Riddle had what I didn’t: power, reach, knowledge. So I would have to either convince him to help me (unlikely considering he’d engineered this situation to begin with), or I’d have to lead him into doing so unawares.

It was an almost impossible task. This would be my first attempt at deceit, and he was *known* for being manipulative, silver-tongued, unpredictable, even amongst my own kind.

But… perhaps I did have something he wanted? He’d saved me for a reason after all; I just needed to calm down and think enough to figure out what it was.

I wracked my brains and resisted the pull of sleep.

The only thing I could think of was that he wanted *me*. After all, that was all I now had to offer. His rescue of me from the shores of the Acheron, could, I suppose, have been a way to further grind his boot into the faces of my siblings. But why bother?

For whatever reason, and the few I came up with seemed weak and inconsistent, Riddle was interested in me. I replayed our conversations in my mind. He wanted me to want to live. Fair enough. He also had offered to seed my wings, which yes, would give me power, but it would also trigger the slow corrosion of what purity remained in me.

So he wanted me to Fall further?

Why—was it again just a way to prove a point? Or was it because in some strange, twisted way, he cared about me?

The idea rang in my head, like an out of key melody. I couldn't work it out. Each ouroboros thought led to the next.

There was no way to confirm any of this right now. Some of it rang true to me, but I needed more information, needed to understand his motives, how this world worked… there was so much I was missing, if only I could—

I woke up again, frustrated. I hadn't even remembered falling asleep.

Tentatively, I raised an arm over my head. Stared at the thin webs between my fingers as my arm shook. So my limbs worked again… and Riddle was nowhere to be seen...

There was no time to waste. I pushed myself up to sit against the pillows, took a deep breath, and then swung my legs over the edge of the bed. No dizziness—a good sign.

Although it took my far longer than I would have liked, I managed to cross the vast expanse of his chambers, back past the litany of strange objects, until I stood in front of the door we had entered from. I was surprised to learn that the more I forced my body to move, the better I felt.

It was an odd door: there was no handle, for starters, and I couldn't quite work out where the hinge was, or where it melded with the rest of the wall. Each time I'd seen it open and close, it seemed to be at Riddle's behest. I stared at the murky reflection of myself in the black surface. Forget disobeying him—could I even do it in the first place?

Tentatively, I reached out with my fingers and touched it. It was cold like metal, but aside from that it felt like a normal surface. I flattened my palm against it, leant forward, and pushed.

"Come on," I whispered, but it remained still.

My own laughable strength alone would never be enough. I looked around for something I could use. There was so much on the shelves that it took me a while before I found it: a large chunk of heavy rock, that I suspected might have been from the comet 65 million years ago. I shook my head, amazed. He really was like a dragon, collecting all these odd historic objects for his hoard.

The thought occurred to me: was that what I was? Another interesting relic for him to stow away and take out everyone once in a while to look at?

No thank you.

My arms hurt but I managed to lift the rock. It was around the size of my head and jagged, half-blackened from the arrival into the Earth's atmosphere. I could still smell the carbon coming off it.

I eyed the door, it's perfect monolithic surface. Just like him. Unreadable, restricting, immovable.

I launched the rock at it.

There was a smash as it hit. The door gave no indication of having even registered the impact. The rock, on the other hand, didn't fare so well. It burst apart into hard, uneven shreds, more brittle than I'd imagined. Pain flashed in my arm as one of the pieces cut into my bicep.

"Ouch," I muttered. Crimson welled up in a gleaming line.

I didn't have long to dwell on my failure. A whisper sounded out next to me, and the shadows moved again. For a moment, I was afraid the form coalescing was Riddle, that he'd somehow known and had come back.

But it was too small for him. Small and—

"Blood!' the shadow boy gasped as he popped out from the darkness. "You're injured?"

I blinked at him.

"No," he moaned, seemingly to himself. "You can't be injured!" His black hands reached towards me and then fluttered. He clearly wasn't comfortable making contact. "Oh God, how did this happen?"

Did they *all* blaspheme down here?

"I wish to leave the room," I told him. I tried to seem as intimidating as I could, but the effect was probably ruined by the fact that I only wore the soft grey trousers that Riddle must have put me in.

The shadow boy shook his head so hard I thought his glasses might slip off. "No! No, that's not allowed."

I made a leap of logic. "Well--neither is my injury, correct?"

He looked at me like I'd told him I was going to eat him. "Of course not!"

Perfect.

I bent down, trying not to give away the effort it cost me, and picked up the nearest pointed slither of rock. Calmly, I pointed it at my forearm.

“You will open this door, or I will use this to injure myself further.”

The shadow boy froze. If he had lungs, I would wager they stopped working. “…but…” he said weakly. “You can’t.”

I had to smile then. He was wrong: it was the one thing I *could* do. Slowly, so he could see quite clearly what I was doing, I pressed the tip into the pale skin of my arm. A tiny bead of red appeared. “I’m not bluffing.”

The creature began to almost vibrate with unease. “Ok! Just—please, stop.”

It was as I thought. Riddle must have given them explicit instructions that no harm come to me. “So you’ll open the door?” I asked.

“Yes…” He was obviously unhappy. But I didn’t care. Not when he pushed on the door with a palm and the black glass swung open easily.

I could have cried with relief at the sight of the chessboard floor of the hall. *This was my chance*! I quickly began to walk. I didn’t know when Riddle would return, or even where he’d gone for that matter. There must be something in this place, some clue that would give me some leverage. Or at least information.

“Where are you going?” The boy followed behind me and wrung his hands. “Please, sir, I wouldn’t recommend even for one of *you* to leave my Lord’s rooms—”

“Who is he? Your Lord,” I asked as I ducked through one of the arches into more hallway. I had already resigned myself to getting lost here.

“What do you mean?” The boy sounded taken aback.

“I mean who is he? What can you tell me about him?”

A silence behind me revealed the echo of my footsteps in the empty space. His left no sound.

“Lord Thomas? Well, he—he’s—”

There was a curious smacking sound. I turned around and stopped walking. The boy had a hand over his mouth.

“He’s what?”

Slowly, the boy shook his head. “I cannot say.”

I stared at him. He shifted, uncomfortable.

“Just that he is important,” he conceded, “that he holds a lot of power here, especially after the victory of the mortal peripeteia.”

Don't remind me. I started to walk again, ducked through another arch. "And where is he now?"

More, endless, hallway. Except… there was something through one of the arches up ahead this time, a smear of dark green.

"Well, he's at the sign off for the Game tonight."

I was half-paying attention, I admit, as I reached what had caught my eye. Visible through the window of the arch was a small garden. Sunlight spilled down from above from a domed glass ceiling, sucked up into the bright green plants that crawled over the ground. And standing tall and proud in the middle was a tree, a great outstretched hand of pale pink blossom. It was magnificent, easily twice the size of that particular species back on Earth.

The boy's words filtered in. I tore my eyes away to stare at him.

"And what is this Game?"

The boy swallowed. "Er, well I don't believe he is going to attend as planned, what with your arrival—"

"But what is it?" I interrupted.

"All the great Houses attend. It's part of the cam…" the boy trailed off.

Confused, I opened my mouth to prod him further. Why did he stand there, silent?

And then the back of my neck prickled. A familiar scent wove into my nostrils—smoke, electricity—at the same time as I became aware of something behind me.

A hand clamped down on my shoulder. If I swore, now would have been the time.

"I see you're feeling better," Riddle said.

Chapter End Notes

And we're into the new stuff! (☞ﾟヮﾟ)☞

According to Dante, the Eighth circle of Hell is used to punish people who used 'fraud' (and he also came up with the fate of Fortune Tellers walking backwards). Dante names the eighth circle of Hell 'Malebolge', which could roughly be translated as 'evil-sacks'.

The rock that Harry chucks at the door is from the comet that wiped out the dinosaurs, 65 million years ago... heh

Entertainment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I see you’re feeling better,” Riddle said. He was smiling, which always made me anxious. “But what are you doing out here, hm?”

“I felt like a walk,” I said carefully.

“Ah I see.” His gaze slid to the shadow boy, who had paled to a horrible shade of translucent grey. “And I assume you agreed.”

The shadow shook his head and made an odd squeaking sound. I think he was too afraid to speak.

Riddle sighed and raised a hand—

“Stop it,” I snapped as I stepped in front. “It’s not his fault, you can’t punish him for that.”

Riddle’s expression was blank. “And why is that?”

“Well,” I said, suddenly aware that this was not a creature who tended to care very much about logic. “I made him do it.”

“No,” Riddle cocked his head, thoughtful, “why is it you think I can’t punish him?”

“It would be undeserved.” Not that I thought that would mean anything to him.

Predictably, he snorted. He turned his attention back to the boy. “I’m curious. How exactly did he ‘*make you do it’*?”

The shadow pushed his glasses up his nose in a nervous gesture. His dark, stubby fingers shook. “Well, my Lord, I didn’t want to, truly, but he—he threatened himself, he *cut his own arm* and I just didn’t want him to do anything else, who knows what they’re capable of! And I know you said—”

I blinked and my forearm was suddenly out in front of me. Riddle had it in a hard grip, fingers deftly manoeuvring it from side to side as he searched for the wound.

“Get off,” I began to say, and then the air went quiet.

I don’t really know another way to describe it. It was if sound became muted, just for a second, just long enough for the hair on my arms to raise. Riddle tutted softly, eyes now locked onto the jagged cut in my skin. Shivers ran down my spine.

“Why am I not surprised.”

I tried to pull my arm back but his hand was like an iron band. I don't even know if he felt it. "Let me go," I tried, and then gasped in pain as he squeezed.

I fought harder, but he just snorted, used his grip to push my back against his chest, trapped by his body.

"Let's see…" he hummed. His thumb found the edge of the wound and dug in. I hissed in pain as slowly, he dragged it across the length of my wound in one long, painful swipe. "Oh, does that hurt? I'm sorry."

It was childish, yes, but it was also the only thing I could do considering my upper body was all but immobilised: I stepped on his foot, as hard as I could.

"Ow," he said, and dropped my arm. He seemed surprised and amused all at once. "Really, Harry? I was only tidying it up a bit," he said, faux-wounded.

"You were enjoying it," I snapped as I inspected myself. *Tidying up*… I stared at the unbroken skin where the wound had been, uneasy.

He shrugged. "So?"

"*So*—"

"M-My Lord," another voice piped up. The shadow boy was still grey, shoulders hunched as if to make himself seem smaller. "I'll take my leave now my Lord, t-the Defoe account…"

Riddle stared at him and then rolled his eyes. "Go."

The demon turned back to me as the boy scurried off down the hall. "So what have you found so far then? On your little adventure?"

I glanced to my left at the out of place garden. "…not much."

Riddle looked distinctly amused for a brief second. It irritated me to the point where I came right out with the question I'd been saving.

"I wish to go to the Game," I said.

The way the amusement faded from his face was immensely satisfying.

"The Game," he repeated.

"That's what I said." I almost winced—why did I always end up sounding like a moody teenager with him?

"And why is that?" He watched my face. "Is it the fighting you wish to see?"

He'd never believe that. And I could hardly give him the real reason, that if '*all the Great Houses*' were in attendance it might provide a way to find someone who could help. They had Seers here, just like on Earth, I was sure of it.

I went for a half-truth, something that would appeal to him. “If I’m here, I may as well try to understand.”

He stared at me. “How admirable.”

“So you’ll take me?”

“I said it was admirable, not that I would help you.”

I sighed. I was beginning to feel tired again.

Riddle took my shoulder again with a smirk. “Tell me, Harry,” he said, and began to steer me back down the hallway. “Why should I? What’s in it for me—aside from having to keep an eye on you in case you get yourself into trouble again?”

I resisted the urge to argue that it was he who had dropped me. “What is it that you want from me?” I went for instead. “Just to sit in your bedroom, for the rest of eternity?”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“I’ll go insane,” I told him.

“Sounds fun.”

I didn’t want to ask this question. And I knew he wanted me to do it, which made it so much worse. But I didn’t have a choice.

“A trade then,” I said. “What would you want in order to take me?”

The pace of his long, confident strides never faltered, but I saw the change in his eyes. The silver in them grew bright, shone out at me like two rings of hot metal around a black pool.

“I’ve already told you what I want,” he said.

I stopped walking. We were already in the shorter hallway to his bedroom, and the black door stared at me, mocking.

“My wings?”

He paused too now. Looked back. “I’ll take you there if you let me seed them.”

“There is nothing else you want?”

I couldn’t read the look on his face then. For a moment he said nothing, and my curiosity only grew, and then he seemed to come back to himself.

“Nope,” he said, and turned as if to walk inside the room.

I bit my lip. Part of me reared up, incredulous at the direction my thoughts were taking. This was a stupid thing even to entertain. But… I couldn’t see an alternative. It was either sit here for eons and let my child wither, or ruin myself further and stand a chance at helping her.

Maybe his offer would expire—maybe he'd grow bored of me, forget me now that I was this odd, in-between thing, and I would be stuck on a shelf to grow dusty with the rest.

"Riddle," I called. My throat was dry.

He didn't turn this time, his hand pressed against the door. His skin looked white against the black, the muscles in his back broad and powerful.

"If you take me to the Games, then…" I swallowed. "Ok."

I supposed if I could fly then it at least made searching for her easier.

There was a pause, and then: "It's a deal?" His voice was light, curious. I wished I could see his face.

I nodded. Took a breath. "A deal."

I felt it sink into my soul, heavy, weighty with ancient meaning. These were the very words they warned our kind against. Never, *ever* try to bargain with the Other.

Slowly, Riddle turned. His cheeks were flushed with excitement, pupils huge.

"Oh Harry," he murmured. "You don't know how pleased I am to hear that."

I felt him draw me in, magnet-like. Tentatively, I slipped over the chessboard floor towards him. Held my head as high as I could even though I was terrified.

"So when do we leave?" I asked.

His eyes ran all over me, kept sticking on my chest, as if he could peer through to the scars of my shoulder blades. "Whenever you like," he said. He seemed to be still caught in the euphoria, distracted.

"Now?"

I shoved away the idea of what would follow once we returned. Compartmentalisation was a fine art, and one that I was getting a lot of practice in.

Riddle smiled at me, probably already thinking of some loophole he could use, some way to play around with what I was now realising was an extremely vague deal.

"I won't screw you over," he said.

I almost flinched. *Could he read my—*

"I can't read your mind. But your face is another matter entirely."

Insulted, I looked at him with the blankest expression I could muster.

He just laughed. "But yes, Harry, as you wish. We can go now. But before we do… there are some rules I'm afraid I must enforce."

I raised an eyebrow. “And what rules are these?”

“Ones to keep you safe. It’s a dangerous event to go to as a Fallen.”

Why did everyone keep making such a big deal about that?

“I have two conditions,” he continued, and held up two fingers, like an ironic peace sign. “You don’t speak to anyone. And you wear my shadows.”

“Conditions were not part of our deal,” I pointed out.

His grin stretched. “Indeed. But neither was time. And if you don’t adhere to my rules, I have no qualms taking you there and pulling you back after ten seconds.”

My teeth ground together. As I’d thought. Well… the shadows would probably help. And the not-talking-to-anyone… I’d just have to do it where he couldn’t see.

“Fine,” I bit out, pleased when there was no weighty click of me locking myself into another binding agreement.

“Wonderful. Let’s get going then, shall we?”

He closed his fingers in a fist and then slowly unfurled them. A tiny seed of darkness grew, birthed into being by his power.

“Go on little one,” he murmured to it. He held his palm up to his mouth and blew.

I was a little unnerved with how quickly it flew towards me—as I’m sure anyone would be when confronted with a mysterious dark blob streaking through the air in their direction. I held my ground as it made contact and shadows writhed and wriggled over the surface of my skin. It felt… pretty horrible, actually, like raw egg. I was almost afraid to open my mouth, in case it tried to slip down my throat too.

Thankfully it was over quickly. I couldn’t really feel it, but if I looked down at myself, my skin was now ever so slightly grey.

“You look very dashing,” Riddle promised me, and smirked.

“Thank you,” I said.

In front of us, a thin black line appeared in the air, twice the size of a man. With his free hand, Riddle flicked his fingers out at it. Like a great black mouth, it slowly stretched open, until the line had expanded to a black oval.

It didn’t, if I’m honest, look like somewhere I particularly wanted to step inside. But I knew the drill by now.

“Remember Harry,” Riddle said, and gripped the back of my neck. “You say nothing. Do nothing. You are here to see, and that is all.”

I nodded, wished for his fingers to leave such a vulnerable part of me. Instead, the pressure increased, until I walked ahead of him, directed.

“Well then,” he said, and laughed as we were swallowed up. “Enjoy!”

The world opened up before us as we stepped out into light.

And what a world it was!

We were in a box at the top of a stadium, looking down on the arena below. It reminded me of a kind of Hellish gladiator ring, filled with spectators: a mishmash of monsters and shadows and those who were wounded and in chains, only half of whom looked to be at all human-shaped. The crowd roared and jostled, until they formed a writhing ring of chaos. And the stench—it was all I could do not to gag. Coppery blood, sweat, grime. It smelled like war.

Riddle’s hand fell from my neck as he settled himself into a grand throne near the balcony. It was unsettling, constructed in an elegant weave of small white bones. He didn’t look at me. Just spread his legs, propped his head in his hand and surveyed the arena.

Slowly, the din began to lessen. My neck prickled as a thousand pairs of eyes swivelled towards us.

Not us—at him. They all stared at him.

My heart beat faster. I was their enemy. They undoubtedly would rip me apart if they knew. Did the shadows work? Did they hide what I was, the thing that the Harpy could smell?

Riddle didn’t seem concerned. “Continue,” he said lazily. He didn’t even need to raise his voice.

I peered over the gilded edge of the box. From this height, the arena below was white circle of sand hemmed in by smooth stone walls. A large black dot was stamped in the middle of the circle, like the pupil of an eye, with two small moons that were orbiting it.

No, not moons. Figures.

Clouds of dust breathed to life as they rushed at each other. One was much larger than the other—almost the size of the old Welsh Giants, I thought—and the other was a young girl, distressingly small in comparison.

Riddle rested his feet on the balcony and crossed his ankles with a sigh. He now had dark sunglasses perched on his nose and a glass of champagne in his hand.

I shook my head, incredulous, and looked back at the fight.

The two opponents were almost at each other when the girl's head whipped back. A great shriek pierced the air, audible even through the crowd.

I leant forward, unable to believe what I was seeing. A serpent's head had emerged from her mouth, black and gleaming. Inch by inch, the snake writhed into the air in a corded line of muscle. The giant halted in confusion. With another terrible shriek, the serpent opened its mouth to display a bed of needle-like teeth.

The crowd went wild as the giant raised his axe and let out a roar of his own. As he sprinted towards her, a thousand onlooking faces stretched Munch-like with excitement.

I wished I could have looked away.

Instead, I watched as the serpent coiled back and sprung forward, quick as a whip. Its monstrous mouth opened as wide as the girl it writhed from, and with one, quick movement it clamped itself over the giant. I was sure it must have defied the laws of physics, the way it managed to stretch right over it.

The serpent bit down, and blood and brains sprayed out in a pink explosion as it cut right through the tree-trunk neck.

It happened so fast that I was stunned.

That was what Riddle had done to the Harpy, I thought, distantly. I just hadn't seen it.

For a moment, the great headless body swayed in place. And then it crumpled sadly to the ground, a *boom* reverberating through the stone. Satisfied, the snake slowly retracted back inside the mouth of the girl, the lump of the head in its throat shrinking as it did.

"Told you," Riddle said and downed his glass as cheering swelled around us.

Tiny little gargoyles went up and down the rows with clinking sacks, collecting winnings.

I realised I hadn't been breathing and sucked in a lungful of air. "I thought nobody could die here?"

"It's a little more complicated than that," Riddle replied, watching the little girl skip off to the side. "If the Games didn't have true death then the stakes would be very low indeed."

I shook my head. "But what's the point?" I don't think I really expected an answer. I just wanted to say something, to know that someone else had seen this and felt the horror I did.

Obviously I picked the wrong person. Riddle dragged his eyes away to look at me, probably interested in the sadness in my voice. "The point?" He seemed confused. "It's entertainment."

"It's *violence*."

Riddle rolled his eyes. "Grow up Harry."

"I'm older than you," I said, numb.

"Oh, are you?" Riddle turned to look out at the crowd again. "You asked to come here, remember?"

Yes, because I thought I'd have more chance of finding some leverage than sitting in your room all day. Not because I wanted to watch a snake rip a man's head off.

"Anyway, don't worry, it's not over yet. They'll have another few fights." He continued with a yawn.

"I thought it was entertaining," I said sullenly.

"That's not the only entertainment."

As if summoned by his words, something popped out of the shadows in the corner of the box. A flash of movement—something dark, something small—followed by a quiet thud. I jumped back, looked around.

"Ha. Not—bad."

Riddle's voice sounded off. I turned back to him. There was black blood on his chin. My eyes followed the drip of it down to his chest, where a thick metal pole disappeared into his skin.

"Riddle!" I stepped forward, my breath caught in my throat. If he was mortal, he would be dead.

He waved me back, coughed up some more blood. "You're just a servant, remember," he said. "Stay behind the chair."

"But—your wound!" I blurted, utterly lost.

He snorted and wrapped his fingers around the metal that stuck out in front of him. They were clawed now, like black talons. "I like to let the first one succeed. Good sportsmanship, y'know?"

"The first one?"

"They usually try to kill me five or six times a Game," Riddle said agreeably. "Like I said: entertainment."

Was this entire world utterly mad?

The look on his face grew more intense as he slowly pulled the metal out of him. I didn't want to look at what fell to the floor as he did so. It left behind a shredded hole right where his heart should have been, a terrible, weeping wound. Once upon a time this wouldn't have been such an easy feat for him.

Riddle looked at the gore-stained weapon and turned it over in his hands. "Let's send this back, shall we?"

He squinted appraisingly, and then held a fist up. As he unclenched his fingers, a small dark sphere grew. It floated out like a bubble until it hung in the air a few feet away.

Still with a hole in his chest, Riddle drew his arm back and hurled the metal bar at the sphere, like a javelin. It disappeared into the blackness, and the sphere winked out.

The demon got to his feet to lean over the balcony. Calmly, he wiped the blood off his face with his forearm.

A scream rang out.

“Got you,” he said, satisfied.

I followed his gaze. To my surprise, it hadn’t come from the crowd. It was in the box three down from us, where a woman with two heads clutched her stomach. Metal glinted in the bright sunlight as she folded to her knees, two tongues lolling out as she panted.

Riddle laughed and waved. “Not bad!” he called.

The two-headed woman lifted a hand and grinned, although her face was still contorted with pain.

I did’t know what her reply was. Because I was already at the door of the box.

They were all insane, I thought, as I fled down the lavish corridor that lay outside the door. Forget the deal—I couldn’t stay there, with him! With a creature that let himself get impaled just for the fun of it!

I had no idea where I was going; we hadn’t come in this way, we’d just appeared in that box through his shadows. I didn’t care. There was a door there, at the end, and that was all I needed. With a hard push, it swung open to reveal a dim stairway ahead. Hope gripped me—maybe this was the exit!

I took the stairs two at a time, pushed my burning lungs as hard as I could. I would have seconds. He was probably already after me, could materialise out of any darkness and grab me. All I focused on was the idea of getting away, ears strained to hear any sound of perusal.

Down, down down I ran, ten flights at least, until at last, there was another door.

This one was large and old and wooden, with norse-like carvings that mottled the surface. I paused, suddenly aware that perhaps it wasn’t the best idea to go around opening strange doors in a place like Hell.

But if I didn’t, I knew what awaited me back upstairs.

I gripped the wooden door knob and pulled. There was some resistance, but eventually it swung open with heavy creak.

I peered inside. A shadowy tunnel stretched into darkness, all damp stone with a low, domed ceiling. Candles were stuck to the walls in grey globs of wax, and stretched back at intervals, like a runway.

I didn't really have any other choice though, did I?

After a few minutes of silent walking, I realised that I must be in the tunnels under the arena. The route wove and dipped, the candles throwing everything into a murky, underwater gloom. The smell of sweat was strong enough that I almost gagged. At first I tried to memorise my route, to make sure I could make it back, but soon the sheer number of twists and turns made it impossible. Not that I was particularly surprised at that.

By the time I heard footsteps echo behind me, I was resigned to the fact that this was a failed endeavour. There was nobody else here, nobody I could talk to or ask questions of. I may as well go back with Riddle and watch the Game, and try my luck again with the crowd somehow.

I stopped and turned. I may have been covered in sweat and cobwebs, but at least I could meet him with as much dignity as I could muster.

Thump, thump, thump, went the footsteps.

The candles on the walls flickered. I frowned and squinted into the gloom where it was coming from. That was rather a heavy tread for one of Riddle's stature…

Thump, thump, thump.

Was he trying to scare me?

The noise came from just around the corner. I watched the shadows stretch in advance, painting his shape on the floor.

My heart stopped. That was not a human shadow.

An odd huffing noise echoed out, like a horse.

"I can hear your heart, little Fallen," a deep, bassy voice rumbled. "Beating so fast… are you afraid?"

The shadow on the floor went still. A big, confusing pool of darkness, with two, unmistakable horns.

The sudden silence cut through me. Should I stay? Was this my chance to talk to someone, to see if I could barter my way back to my child? But he'd called me Fallen. And nobody was supposed to know that.

A head peered around the wall. A bull, with two distinct, blue human eyes.

He smiled at me. "Little Fallen," he said, and I felt it in my bones. "I'm going to eat you."

I barely felt the sting of the stone as my feet slapped against the floor. I barely even felt my fear. It was all overridden by a single goal.

Run!

The monster followed.

Forget trying to memorise my path. I took turns at random, knocked into the walls, burnt my elbows on candles, anything to lose whatever it was that hunted me. I ran until my lungs ached, until sweat stung at my eyes.

He never stopped talking.

“I’m going to rip your spine out,” he rumbled. “And use it to pick my teeth when I’m done with you.”

“Run faster, little Fallen, I like my meals hot!”

Each time, it gave me the burst of speed I needed.

Where was Riddle? I knew it was a terrible thought, but I couldn’t help it. I needed him. I needed him to come and stop whatever this thing was, like he had with the Harpy. I was too terrified to remember my pride, to remember my power. I was prey here. And this thing, this horned beast, he was going to *eat me*.

The ground ahead sloped up to a weak, milky light that reached into the gloom. I scrambled towards it, pushed on by the unrelenting thud of footsteps and heavy breath behind me.

A deep chuckle echoed off the walls. “Nowhere to go now.”

I turned, desperate. This was it. There was nothing I could do; I'd die here. I could try to take out one of it's eyes, maybe, as it speared me through, but that was probably all I could do like this. Bitterness washed through me--if only I still had my power!

The air went quiet. A familiar quiet. My ears popped.

“Enough," a familiar voice called out.

Riddle appeared out of the shadows. He slipped into existence in the space between me and my pursuer.

It was instinctive, the way my muscles froze, my foot hovered above where stone bled into sand.

“*You,*” the monster growled. Now that I'd stopped running, I took him in properly: large and grotesque, a muscular human body with leathery, pale grey skin, and the shaggy head of a bull.

“Oh come on,” Riddle sighed. “I really didn’t think you’d be this annoyed,”

The bull-man's eyes narrowed into two glinting blue slits. "No, Thomas, I just love having to clean up after your mess."

I felt like I'd lost my mind. Like I had whiplash. The creature having a sarky argument with Riddle had been trying to eat me not ten seconds ago. Hadn't he?

"And aren't you good at it!" Riddle said. It was saccharine enough that even I felt annoyed.

The bull-man made an angry grumbling noise, deep in his chest. "What are you doing here? With this?" He jerked his horned head at me.

Riddle turned, as if only just remembering I was there. "Ah," he said. "My little runaway servant."

I bristled, even though I knew it was part of our deal.

"A servant?" the bull-man chuckled. "I can smell him, you know."

"Smell what?"

The bull-man made some kind of aborted gesture towards me, and the next instant Riddle had him shoved up against the tunnel wall.

It made for an odd image. Riddle's forearm looked like a twig across the monster's thick neck, but he didn't seem to be expending much effort pinning what must have been the weight of a car to the wall.

To my surprise, the bull-man allowed it, even though veins emerged like worms across his forehead and that foreboding rumble got louder.

"I think not," Riddle said pleasantly. "I don't know what you think you smell, but I advise you to forget that you did."

"You do realise word has already spread," the bull-man choked.

"I don't care."

I didn't think he was breathing; the whites of his eyes were turning red.

"Fine," he wheezed eventually.

Riddle waited a moment or two, enjoying his pain.

"Excellent," he said after a few seconds had drifted by, and stepped back.

The bull-man coughed, and clutched his throat with two great clawed hands.

Riddle raised his eyebrows.

With a snarl, the monster turned and stalked away into the gloom of the tunnel. His footsteps shook the ground. T*hud, thud, thud*.

“And remember,” Riddle called, voice bleached of any warmth,“he’s *mine*.”

The next *thud* came a beat late.

Next was my turn. I stiffened as Riddle’s gaze slid to me. “Come here Harry.”

Like a dog. I folded my arms and didn’t move.

Riddle rolled his eyes and made to grab me. “Really don’t be so—”

My foot stung on hot sand as I stepped back out of his reach. I almost slipped with surprise, tottered backwards to regain my balance.

Sand?

Riddle’s voice abruptly cut off. His face flickered, some odd expression passing over, it before it settled into a kind of unnerving blankness.

“What?” I found myself asking.

He reached out a hand again. It was trembling, I noticed with some confusion. “You…”

Concerned, I tried to step forward.

But my foot stopped midair, halted by some invisible wall.

“You *idiot*,” he finished lowly.

Ahead of me, a loud, excited voice echoed around the arena: “A CONTESTANT HAS BEEN CHOSEN.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm a bit concerned parts of this won't make sense because I didn't spend much time explaining... let me know what you think and I can always go back and add stuff in.

I was also trying to think of some good references here... but the only one I got for ya is the bull-headed monster, who is based on the Minotaur. In traditional Greek mythology, when King Minos of Crete failed to sacrifice a bull to Poseidon, the god caused his wife to lust after the animal. By it, she conceived the Minotaur, a monster with a bull's head and a man's body, which was confined in a labyrinth.

Death Saves All

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Riddle clenched his fists. The floor where he stood splintered with a great crack.

I pressed my palms against the air ahead of me, and then my whole body. But it was useless. My toes ended up squashed right where the sand turned back into stone.

“What is this?” I said, disbelieving.

A sick comprehension wormed its way into my mind. The monster, the bull-man, he hadn’t been chasing me, had he? He’d been herding me.

Riddle shook his head at my efforts. “You won’t be able to.”

“Why not?”

I slammed my fist against it—I’ll admit, I was feeling desperate at this point.

“You stepped over the line,” Riddle said. A bit dramatically, in my opinion. “You offered yourself.”

I stared at him.

“To the Game.” He rubbed at the space between his eyebrows.

The Game—as in the one where I had watched a snake emerge from a girl’s mouth and bite someone’s head off?

“You’re joking,” I said. And then thought about it. “I refuse. They can’t make me fight if I don’t wish to.”

“Well Harry,” Riddle ground out, “that’s all very well, but if you don’t fight, you will die.”

As if summoned by his words, a low wash of noise crept in from the light at the end of the sandy path. The crowd, buzzing with anticipation. I could even make out the croaks of the gargoyles, taking bets.

I shook my head. “But that’s—”

“A CONTESTANT HAS BEEN CHOSEN,” the voice boomed out again.

Riddle slammed his palm against the unseen wall. “Get out there,” he glared at me. “Go. Or they’ll give you no weapon.”

As much of a trickster as he was, I trusted that Riddle didn't want me dead quite just yet. He'd dragged me from the beaches of the Acheron, killed that Harpy, healed my wound.

So he was probably right.

It was that thought that had me turning mechanically towards to light.

"I won't fight for entertainment," I said.

"But you'll fight to save yourself. Save your child, Harry, remember her?"

I forced one foot in front of the other. That was manipulative. But it worked. I looked back at him, palms pressed against the air, face dark.

"Pick three," he called.

My feet carried me up the slope. By this point my mind had sort of switched off. I had no idea what I would find, what kind of horrifying evil *Other* I would face. I didn't even know what I would do—if I would fight, like Riddle wanted or… well, was there another option?

The first thing I noticed, when I stepped out into that circle of sand, wasn't the oppressive screams of the crowd or the writhing sea of unfamiliar creatures in every direction. It was the great, headless body of the previous contestant, still slumped against the wall nearby. They hadn't even bothered to drag it away and a thousand tiny black dots shimmered in the air around it.

Would the flies hover like that around my body?

I tried to breathe steadily even though bile rose in my throat. The sun beat down like a hot, dry hammer. Fresh sweat sprang from my forehead, ran down my face to sting my eyes.

I needed to be calm. I needed to think. But as I came to a stop, feeling like a tiny ant beneath the rest of them, the voice boomed out once more.

"CHOSE YOUR WEAPON."

It was coming from above. I shielded my eyes with my fingers and looked up. Hovering high in the air was some kind of large, wasp-like creature. It was about the size of a man, with thin wings that sliced the air so quickly that it was hard to see them at all. A baby's face peered down at me atop the striped body, catching me looking. Was this their terrifying version of a cherub?

Disoriented, I scanned the upper level of the stadium, searching for the boxes. It didn't take long to find the one I wanted. Riddle was already there. He'd forgone his throne in favour of standing, hands gripped around the elegant balcony railing.

An arms-length in front of me, a dark shadow suddenly appeared. It really came from nothing this time: the sun was so bright that it was the only spot of shade. It wriggled, thrashed, and then split into six.

Six black balls hovering in a perfect line.

I looked over to the other side of the arena, past the black hole in the centre, to my opponent who stood in front of his own set. Unlike the previous contestants, he made no pretence at humanity. A great, corpulent lion stared back at me. He looked like he'd just come from a fight, his frizzy mane of golden fur matted with blood and dirt. Two straight horns poked up out of his skull, and his claws looked more like a set of sharp kitchen knives than anything else. Either could easily spear me through.

With surprising delicacy, he reached out and plucked the sixth ball from the air.

The crowd stirred, excited.

I refocused back on my own. There was absolutely nothing to indicate what they were, what they stood for. But Riddle had said *three*, and at this point I was glad for any direction at all.

The shadow felt curiously soft as my fingers closed around it, like a ball of water. How did this work, I wondered as I pulled it through the air towards me, what weapon was this supposed to be?

I looked up, suddenly aware that around me, titters had begun to break out. Instinctively, my eyes found Riddle, but his face was still impassive.

"HARRY HAS MADE A BRAVE CHOICE," the wasp intoned from above. I had no idea how it knew my name.

The shadow ball I held warped. Instead of a sphere, my fingers now cupped a small black dagger.

My heart sank. This was nothing more than a kitten's claw when compared to the size of the lion's talons.

"BLOOD-PUPPET IS A FAVOURITE… BUT CERTAINLY A SURPRISE WHEN FACING ANGEL-SKIN!"

My blood ran cold. *Angel-skin?*

The wasp filled me—us—in.

"BLOOD-PUPPET NEEDS ONLY A SINGLE TASTE OF BLOOD FOR THE UNFORTUNATE VICTIM TO NO LONGER OWN THEIR MIND. WITH THE ENTRAPPED FORCED TO REFLECT THE MOVEMENT OF THE KNIFE'S WIELDER, BLOOD-PUPPET IS A POPULAR CHOICE FOR GATE DEATHS."

His tapered body gestured to that odd black hole in the ground, where the sand disappeared into nothingness.

He couldn't have been a little more specific? My mind raced. *So I need to draw blood. Draw blood and then… the lion will copy my movement?* I eyed him—more specifically his claws. Getting close enough without getting killed… that didn't really seem possible.

“BUER HAS CHOSEN ANGEL-SKIN,” the wasp boomed, and I refocused. “MADE FROM THE DIVINITY OF THE LAST ANGEL CAPTURED AT BLUE ROCK HILL.”

I sucked in a breath. I knew who that was. My sister, who had been stolen away, millennia ago, before places even had names. We had assumed her destroyed, that they had killed her, not that they—

I felt sick at the thought of it.

“ANGEL-SKIN ACTS AS AN IMPENETRABLE BARRIER TO THE WEARER, PREVENTING HARM FROM ANY BLADE OR ARROW.”

The crowed roared their hilarity. I blinked my tears away, tipped my chin, stared at them defiantly. I may have dammed myself but I wouldn’t cower and beg before them. Before Riddle.

The wasp went on. “THE FIRST TO EITHER FORCE THEIR OPPONENT INTO THE GATE—WHERE THE HUNGRY MOUTHS OF THE NINTH CIRCLE AWAIT—OR TO KILL THEM OUTRIGHT, WILL BE CROWNED VICTORIOUS. TODAY’S PRIZE…” He paused, relishing in the suspense. “AN UPPER DEMON! FALLEN FROM OUR GRACE’S FAVOUR JUST YESTERDAY!”

The crowd roared. I got the impression that this was a good thing, even though to me it sounded more like a punishment. *What was one supposed to do with an upper demon?*

The lion—Buer—seemed suitably excited if the snarl that ripped through the air was anything to go by. And great, now I’d seen his teeth. Just as sharp and deadly-looking as his claws.

The wasp began to speak again, hyping up the crowd, but I tuned it out and stared across the sand. To summarise: my opponent had skin that couldn’t be touched by any blade. And I had a knife that could control the movement of my opponent but needed their blood to work.

I tried to think pragmatically. Was there any way to make him bleed without cutting him? Maybe I could lead him into the gate without the puppeteering part… he must be slow if he had to move all that weight.

“THE COUNTDOWN HAS STARTED.”

I was so distracted by the sudden notion of a *countdown*, that I almost missed Buer’s movement.

He was not slow.

A block of snarling muscle hurled itself towards me, two black eyes dark with hunger.

There was no time to think. I ran. Well. Probably more apt to say that I sprinted. The sand skidded beneath my feet as I sought to put as much distance between us as possible.

“Look how he runs! A rabbit!” Buer roared. He threw back his head and laughed, and the crowd laughed along with him.

I was just thankful it prolonged my existence.

“Come here and try to scratch me with that claw of yours!”

He dived at me again, a single pounce.

Once again, I threw myself to the side. It was a small arena, and we had now almost switched positions. He was avoiding the black eye of the Ninth Gate in the middle of the circle… was he afraid he would fall?

He stopped. Licked his chops. “How about a starter…” he called, playing up for the crowd.

Lazily, the great lion padded over to the wall, his body swaying in time with his tail.

I realised what he planned to do just in time to brace myself.

The dead body of the previous contestant lay still and helpless as Buer sniffed him. And then, with a snarl, he buried his head into the chest and snapped his jaws shut. Meat tore free in a bloody arc as he threw back his head and gulped it down.

The noises of the crowd faded, replaced by my own heartbeat, loud in my ears. *I'm going to die.* He was playing with me. The only reason I hadn’t been sliced into small pieces by now was that he wanted to put on a show.

His head swivelled to look at me, his chin and the fur on his neck now stained. There was nothing in those bright eyes but hatred.

“Are you ready to run?” he said, and leapt.

This time I wasn’t quick enough—or rather, he’d stopped pretending I was.

A great clawed hand knocked the air out of my lungs. I slammed back into the wall, breathless, only just able to keep my hand around the dagger.

For a moment, I stared at myself, surprised that I’d survived. And then the pain came in; bright and hot, blooming. Crimson filled my vision in three great scores across my chest where his claws had sliced into me. I could see the pink gleam of flesh before it turned wet with blood.

A voice sounded out in my head, emotionless. *Get up or you will die.*

It hurt to breathe, moving was agony. But death, I was sure, would probably hurt more.

Unsteady, I used the wall behind me to push up to a kneeling position. Blood splattered down and the sand sucked it up, greedy. Grey spots filled my vision. I almost fell forward, had to catch myself with one hand on the ground. Was the buzzing in my ears the flies, come already?

The crowd roared their approval.

Buer stood only a few feet away. He licked his claws, thoughtful. “I haven’t tasted anything this delicious in a while… Let me have a little more, won’t you?”

I saw the thick muscles of his legs tense, his expression contort into a hungry snarl.

My hand closed around the sand under me, a tight fist, and I threw it as I hurled myself to the left.

Buer recoiled, screamed in fury as the sand caught in his large eyes, the folds of fat over them.

I was already up, scrabbling around the wall, trying to get as far away as I could. How long did I have?

My hands hit something soft. I looked down. The dead giant lay next to me, his great, pale body ripped apart. Instead of disgust, a weird, hysterical sense of companionship bubbled up. At least someone understood.

Instinctively, my eyes found Riddle. He looked a second away from launching himself off the balcony and into the pit. The surrounding space was devoid of people; they had all edged away from him. He was probably doing his evil aura thing again.

A roar pulled me back. Buer’s eyes were now framed red and inflamed. He looked thunderous.

“Good try," he seethed, "but now I’ll make it slow.”

He took a step forward, and then another, prowling in a way that was no longer quite so human-like.

It was as I stood there and faced my death that the thought occurred to me. I looked at the innocuous black knife in my hand, now wet with my own blood.

And then at the dead man on the ground.

Sorry, I thought at him.

With a calmness that surprised me, I wiped the blade on my trousers, and as surreptitiously as I could, sliced into the thick, cold arm that lay beside me. It went in and out with sickening ease. The dagger grew hot in my hand but I barely noticed. Buer was almost on me.

There was really only one way to go. I backed away from the wall, step by painful step, towards the black opening in the centre of the arena. Sounds floated out: whispers, snatches of songs, a faint melody drifting on the breeze. Goosebumps rose on my arms, despite the heat. My head rushed. Probably blood loss. I couldn’t think about what would happen if I fell in.

The lion halted. He looked at me like I'd gone crazy. "So afraid of my teeth that you would take the Ninth instead?"

Behind him, the body on the ground twitched.

Buer snorted and continued to walk forwards. We were now in one straight line: the dead man, Buer, me, and the gate.

In my peripheral vision a shape silently rose from the floor. I kept my eyes on Buer, let my desperation show on my face.

"I'm not afraid of you," I said, hoping to distract. It was the first thing I'd said since I'd stepped out into the arena.

If he was surprised, he didn't show it. His fangs gleamed as he laughed. "Yes you are."

Behind him, the dead man slowly mirrored my position: slightly hunched, hand brandishing an imaginary dagger. I didn't know if the crowd noticed. They must have done, but they were so loud at this point that I couldn't tell.

I swallowed the copper taste in my mouth. *Now or never*, I thought, and flung myself forwards.

I had just enough time to catch the look of confusion in the lion's face, the way he stopped short. And then I was directly in front of him, within swiping distance of those great claws. My body shook, with fear, with exertion. I saw a hungry gleam enter his eyes, his jaw turn up in a smile—

And then I stopped. Squatted down, and wrapped my arms around thin air.

I didn't breathe. My heart didn't beat, my blood didn't run. I stared at his eyes, the whites a ring around the pupil, as they grew wider and wider.

But he was too late.

Two tree-trunk arms appeared on either side of the lion's shoulders, and Buer was pulled off his feet by the crushing embrace of the dead man.

My knees shook with the effort to keep myself standing, but I maintained my strange pose. And the dead man mirrored it.

Buer snarled, snapped his jaws back, paddled his great clawed feet. But although he was heavy, the dead man was twice his size—and stronger. And dead, that probably helped too. There was no flinching, no hiss of pain as the claws caught him. Just frozen, headless docility.

I took a step forward, tentative.

Buer's jaws closed on silence.

I took another. And another. Angled my path just so we would just pass by each other, a hairs-breadth outside the range of his flailing.

The crowd screamed, on their feet as I slowly walked Buer up to where the sand disappeared into darkness. Held him there with my borrowed strength, a step away from the gate, until he was blue in the face with fear.

“Harry!” he rumbled, panicking.

“Do you yield,” I croaked.

Buer struggled, but here was nothing he could do. A single step—that was all I had to take.

The word was more of a roar than anything else: “Don’t!” Clearly he was terrified of that pit, of the strange, child-like singing that floated out of it.

I didn’t want to push him in there. I didn’t want to kill him.

“Do you yield?” I asked again. My blood pumped in my ears, a confirmation I was still alive. *I am, I am, I am*.

With a final jerk of his limbs, the lion locked eyes with me. He bared his fangs, dripping with saliva. His great, shaggy head dipped in a single, brief nod.

Relief crashed over me. Slowly, I forced my fingers to uncurl from their death grip around the knife. Began to soften my shoulders, withdraw my arms from their tense stance.

And then, seemingly of his own will, the dead man stepped forward.

Both lion and corpse were carried right over the edge of the hole.

I froze. Caught Buer’s face, contorted in betrayal, venom in his gaze, as he disappeared into the darkness.

I didn’t understand. My knees hit the sand, my hand finally allowed to clutch at the wounds on my chest. The grey spots in my vision returned as I searched the crowd around me for some answers.

What… what just happened?

When I saw him, I wasn’t really surprised. Riddle, finally with a smile on his face. Fingers outstretched.

The moment we locked eyes he disappeared into a zip of shadow.

He stepped through a second later, bare feet tapping the blood-stained sand in front of me. The noise surrounding us faded as he was noticed.

“Why did you do that,” I snarled at him, full of shock. “He yielded!”

Riddle towered up against the sun. A beautiful, terrible monster. “There is no yielding,” he said. He reached down, and thumbed the blood on my chin. Smiled some more as he smeared it over my bottom lip.

“And now for your prize.”

His fingers gripped my shoulder and the arena melted away.

My body didn’t seem to understand that I was alive still. I was freezing. I couldn’t feel my fingers or my toes. My muscles only gave a delayed weak jerk when I tried to move, to struggle away from his touch. I didn’t think I’d ever felt so small. I went from a soaring high of having pulled off a third option, a way neither of us had to die—to *this*.

“You murdered him,” I said woodenly, as darkness rushed by. Light appeared in front.

“No,” Riddle said, “I saved you.”

We stepped out of the shadow. Back in his room. Back with the trinkets on the shelves and that wide, low bed.

I lurched forward, his arm around me the only thing that kept me on my feet. How did I still have blood left to bleed with the state my chest was in?

“I saved myself!”

“How can a being like you *still* be so naive?” There was real wonder in his voice, real anger. “He didn’t yield. There’s no such thing as yielding in Hell. He was waiting for you to release him so he could bite you in half.”

I shivered but I think it was more to do with the coldness than the mental image. “You don’t know that.”

“And you know nothing about how this place works.”

We stumbled over to the bed. I could barely see it.

“Why don’t you tell me then,” I snapped. My tongue felt thick in my mouth.

The world tipped and then I was lying on my back. I hissed at the pain as my chest stretched. Weakly, I pressed my palms over the wound, tried to keep the blood inside me.

Riddle pulled my hands away instantly.

“Fine. You want to know?" he said angrily, "we eat each other." His fingertips skimmed the edges of my torn flesh. Heat flowed from his touch.

I didn’t have the energy to wince; my anger was the only thing keeping me conscious right now. “Huh?” I managed.

“When your Father first created this place,” Riddle said, “those that filled it still had some Divinity they had managed to cling on to. We called them the Dukes.”

I couldn’t quite believe he was actually answering a question. Of course it would be whilst I was halfway dead.

“For a long time they ruled over those born here,” he went on, “cold and weak, so unlike them. But all those with power eventually fall. And when they did, a million hungry mouths were waiting. Their power ended up spread across Hell, stolen by whoever had enough cunning to take it.”

His fingertips hovered over my shoulder. I thought it might be dislocated from when Buer had first thrown me against the wall, and from the look in his eyes, he did too.

Slowly, the pain began to fade.

I tried to make sense of it. “So you eat each other? For Divinity?”

“Yes,” he said. “The tiny scraps of it that were left to us by your God.”

“But Divinity kills you,” I pointed out, and winced as he cupped my shoulder. “When we wield it, you run. *He* gave it to us for exactly that purpose: to drive away the darkness.”

He smiled at me, sharklike. “Why do you think we care so much about it? It’s the only thing that we can use to resist the terror and the darkness of our home. The only thing that makes us stop feeling so empty.”

Like how I felt now. Without my wings. Cold and discarded.

He continued. “You used it to heal me, remember? As you of all people should know, small amounts are powerful. *If* they are woven in correctly, not large enough to form a hungry mouth to devour with.”

I thought back to when I’d sewn up his soul with my own. He was right. My soul was so intermingled with my Divinity, it would have carried across to him, too. And then I thought of Ezekiel. How his energy had felt inside me, clawing through me and consuming. Devouring.

Guilt stabbed at me. *My brother…*

I cried out as Riddle shoved the socket of my shoulder back into place and a horrible grating click sounded out.

“You—!” I clutched at my shoulder. The pain was intense, terrible, but dissolved in a few seconds, replaced by a low-burning ache.

“Dislocated,” he said, completely unrepentant. He’d moved back out of reach, sensibly, but still leered down me. “Better to do that kind of thing when you were distracted.”

I heaved in breaths and tried not to throw up.

“You’re not going to thank me?”

“No,” I said icily.

He smiled and got off the bed. “Not very polite of you.”

I didn’t really have the energy to retort. I still felt terrible, bruised and tired and aching. He *had* healed me—the marks on my chest looked days old… but they were still there. Still red and tender.

Riddle burst out laughing. “Your expression right now,” he said, and shook his head. “Like a little kicked puppy.”

Anger blazed to life again and I gritted my teeth. “You won’t heal the rest?”

He stretched, the muscles of his bare abdomen flexing. “Of course I will. Enough for you to uphold your end of the bargain. But probably nothing more. You’re beginning to grow a reputation for wandering off, after all.”

I opened my mouth to argue and then shut it again. It was as if a bell went off in my head. *My end of the bargain…* Somehow, with all the adrenaline I’d managed to forget about it.

My wings.

“When?” I ended up asking, dreading the answer.

“I’ll let you sleep for a while,” he said. “And then we’ll start.”

I bit my lip and looked around. “Here?” I’d never seen this process happen before—of course I hadn’t, I would have stopped it if I had—but I assumed a bedroom would not be the appropriate venue.

“Just relax. Get some rest. I’ll be back soon.”

Relax? I almost wanted to laugh. Even with how exhausted I felt, there would be no chance of that now. Not when I knew that the next time the door opened it would be to perform a ritual so dark that my kind didn’t speak of it.

He’d already reached the door by the time I’d calmed down enough that something occurred to me. I thought back to what he had said: scraps of Divinity from eons ago, and they still fought for it, scattered amongst a million demons.

“Riddle,” I called, tentative.

He turned, “Harry.” I didn’t like how soft his voice was.

“Back in the canyon, when I gave you that part of me…” I trailed off. I didn’t want to believe it. What had I done, when I had given that teenage a pure, undiluted thimbleful of myself?

He broke out into a smile then. So pretty, so warm that I almost smiled back.

“Oh yes,” he said. “You changed everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Buer is a spirit that appears in a 16th-century grimoire, where he is described as a Great President of Hell, having fifty legions of demons under his command. He appears when the Sun is in Sagittarius.

Ninth Circle - in Dante's imagining of Hell, there are nine concentric circles, each with a different punishment based on the sin that a person commits. The higher numbered circle, the worse the punishment. The Ninth Circle is the final and innermost circle, reserved for the worst kinds of sinners: the souls guilty of betrayal.

Mirrored

As much as I hated that I had bartered myself for what amounted to a failed escape attempt, I had agreed to the deal. I had nowhere to run. Nothing to use to delay. I had said he could seed my wings, and so now he would.

He prepared by hand, which I found surprising. He lit every individual candle, all sixty six of them, with one that he'd breathed a flame to first.

It changed the feel of the room. Deepened the shadows, made them dance. I found myself thinking about it: rituals, dances. One of my sisters had come up with the idea, used it as a way to bond together the tribes, knit them into larger societies so they could develop faster. And now here I was. Getting sucked into it, just like a mortal, my mind already anticipating the next step.

He finished the light. The smoke was to follow. A large metal bowl with a silver belly was placed on the floor next to the bed. Raspy sticks of cedar and cinnamon went in, and the bowl began to warm. A thick white smoke uncurled through the air. Soon I could taste it in the back of my throat.

Riddle rose from the floor, a shadow himself.

"There's more?" I asked. My voice echoed in the silence.

He smiled. "Just one more thing." His arms stretched out, palms unfurling to show sharp black fingertips. "As you know," he said, "when I do this it will weaken me too. I'll feel better knowing we're somewhere safe."

"You're moving us?" I couldn't help but feel alarmed.

"Don't fret," he teased. "You won't even notice it."

"Where are we going?"

"Our own little bubble. Outside of Hell."

I hadn't even realised he could do that. Hadn't realised that was *possible*.

He fell silent. His muscles tensed. I saw in the flex of his bicep, the straining of his back, his physical power.

An odd hum tickled my ears as the temperature began to rise, and my anticipation with it. The noise grew louder, almost like chanting, before abruptly, my ears popped.

Riddle dropped his arms, pleased. "There. All done."

I eyed him. Fought to stop from shifting uncomfortably. "And now what happens?"

He paused. Turned to look at me with eyes that glittered black. "Lie down on the bed."

Heat flushed my cheeks but the words of our deal vibrated in my chest. They bound me—I had no choice. My shoulder ached as I turned to lie on my front, and the soreness in my chest flared to life. I rested my head on the backs of my hands and tried to be as still as possible.

“How does it work?”

“It’s easy. Well, in theory. I use my first feather to draw the runes on your back. Give you a bit of my blood tomorrow just to speed things along and then it’s done.”

I mulled it over. For beings like us, the first feather was important. If he pulled it out, it would leave him vulnerable, unable to heal his wings on his own for at least a year. Maybe more.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

He laughed. “Thank you for your concern, Harry. I’m sure.”

I swallowed. Imagined the pain that was facing me. Seeding was supposed to be incendiary. Horrifying. But I’d agreed to it. If it meant I might be closer to saving my child then I had no regrets.

Riddle’s left wing stretched out beside him. In the warmth of the light it gleamed black, like a crow’s. It really was beautiful. I almost felt sad at what he was about to do.

His expression turned solemn, anticipatory. The tapered tip of his wing gently moved until it hovered over his shoulder, within reach. He was gentle, as he took hold of it. I could see in his eyes that he had never done this before, didn’t know what kind of pain to expect. He took a single, slow breath. Spread his feathers until even I could see the perfect one, right on the end, blacker than the rest.

And then, in one smooth, graceful movement, he pulled it out.

It was surprisingly quick. A full body shudder ran through him—from the muscles of his calves to the wings themselves, which trembled for a moment—and his nostrils flared. But aside from that there was no overt reaction, no crying out.

His wing disappeared into him and we both stared at the feather in his hand. The long, graceful arc of its white centre stem, the sharp tip of which he would use to pierce through my skin in mere minutes. There was a tiny spot of red, right at the base.

I couldn’t quite believe he’d done it. Suddenly the ritual became real in a way it hadn’t been before. More so than the candles and the smoke and the room… nobody would harm themselves in this way with any degree of flippancy.

He looked at me now, hungry. The otherworldly swell of his pupils scared me but I held his gaze, defiant.

“Now,” he said softly, “don’t move.”

Cedar filled my lungs and the candle on the bedside table near my head suddenly whooshed a bright crimson. I watched a glistening bead of wax roll down the white pillar. The air on my skin, my blood, it all felt warm. Was this it—the ritual, already taking effect?

"Are you ready?" Riddle's voice was deep now. I felt it in the press of my collarbone to the bed.

"No," I said honestly.

He chuckled and I wanted to squirm. "That's ok. I'll be here."

That is entirely the problem, I wanted to say.

"Deep breath for me," he said, and I felt the press of something hard and sharp to my back.

I went still. My lungs inflated, saturated with air until it ached. And just before I breathed out, he pressed down, pierced through my skin.

My brain struggled to keep up.

It hurt, of course it did, but the pain was strange. With each drag of the feather's spiny tip into my skin, each wound that he inflicted, my breathing slowed and my eyelids drooped. It was a terrible hurt, yes, but it was also somehow… *good*. A hair's breadth away from pleasure. Something to get lost in, to drown in.

I watched the candle light as he carved into me. Felt like I was that bright crimson flame as it wavered and flickered in the darkness.

Minutes, hours passed—I didn't know which. Eventually, he finished.

I heard my name. Felt the warm press of his hands against my arms as he helped me to turn, to sit up. My mouth felt wet, my brain heated.

I dragged my eyes up to his, black and molten in the light. There was a dark smear high on his left cheekbone. My blood.

Riddle bit his lip, stared. He looked almost like he was in pain, like he hurt too.

"I *can't*," he said to me, voice raspy, whispered it like a secret, "how could I not?" And then my cheeks were gripped between his sticky palms and his mouth was on mine.

I don't know what he tasted like. All I could focus on, all I could feel was the soft press of his lips between mine, the warm wetness of his tongue as it curled into my mouth, licked in, the way his body pressed against my front.

He took. Took like I already belonged to him, like he hungered for me.

And I—

—I kissed him back. I was drunk with something, with whatever it was that he had done to me. I felt giddy with the pleasure, with how solid he was before me, the way his hands moved to grip at my thighs, tug me into his lap. I'd never kissed another. Not like this. *How could I have waited all these eons? All that time without realising—*

I didn't want to think. About it, about anything. My back grew sore and painful, the heat bleeding into something more akin to hurt. His tongue, his touch was the only thing that made it soften.

"Slow," Riddle breathed. He ducked his head, nosed into my neck instead.

I became aware that I panted. My fingers curled and uncurled on his shoulders.

My back—

"It will pass. Just let it be," he said to me. Held me as I began to cry out and writhe as the cuts sparked to life, buried down like white fire to the bone.

I couldn't move much. My body was still weak from the fight—as he said, he hadn't healed me fully yet. All I could do was take it, and wish for it to be over, breathe in that cedary smoke and grind my teeth.

And then it *was* over.

I had changed. I shook, trembled like a leaf. But that cold emptiness inside me, that had been present since I'd woken on the shores of Acheron, that was now gone.

I had power. It was different from what I was used to, a dark, silky serpent, coiled in the heart of me. But it was there. It was back. And I felt… *good.*

"Ok?" he said, testing. He ran his gaze over me, assessing.

I shifted, winced as my back pulled. "I'm ok." I sounded dazed.

He went to draw back, probably to wash his hands. Something inside me flinched, terrified. His skin was the only thing that grounded me, his presence settled the fire that still danced in my blood.

The tiny noise that left my mouth was soft. Barely audible, barely a whimper. Like an animal.

Riddle froze. The blood rushed to my cheeks so fast I felt dizzy. I pressed my lips together.

"Harry?" he said, unbearably gentle.

I shook my head slightly. Closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to see him. I didn't have the energy to fight what I wanted now. "Just… will you stay?"

There was silence for a moment or two. I don't know what his expression was, what he thought. And then I heard the bed sheets shift. A sigh. And warmth cocooned me, his body pressing hot against mine.

“Of course,” he murmured.

I felt his heart beat against my palm. I was nestled into the curve of his chest, face to face. The crown of my head tucked under his chin, so I didn’t have to look at him as he stroked his fingertips down my sides, across my shoulders. Breathed me in. So gentle that I was confused.

I could sense more change coming. Sleep pulled at me, my body itching to adapt to the splinter of him that pushed up against my soul.

His fingertips skirted my back and I froze, waited for the pain. The touch was light, so light I could barely feel it. But I could. And it felt like reverence, like some kind of awful promise.

"Do you hate me for this?” His lips moved against my neck.

Do I hate him? “…how could I not?” I said softly.

He sighed, like he’d expected it. Tired. “I’m trying to protect you. To keep you safe. You just don’t understand.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. And thankfully, whilst I was in the middle of trying to work out my response, my body decided for me.

I forgot about his words. I forgot about the physical feeling of my back, my wounds. All I knew was the warmth around me, the steady metronome near my ear that lulled me to sleep, like a clock counting down—

Tick—tick—tick—

He looked different asleep. I’d only seen it once before. Once, under the summer willows in England. I don’t think I liked it. Yes, he looked young and gentle. But that wasn’t the Riddle I knew. When he was awake, when his eyes flashed with dark promise and his mouth tugged into a perpetual smirk—that was the Riddle I had befriended. Bursting with so much raw energy and will that it was hard to drag yourself away.

Clearly, he was tired. The fact that I’d managed to slip away from his grip, leave the bed and walk to the end of the room without waking him was enough of an indication. And he seemed paler than usual too, hollow eye sockets dark and bruised.

Did they know—the rest of his siblings—that he slept curled on a ball on his side, his nose scrunching as he slept?

What did it mean that he trusted me enough to be so vulnerable?

The cynical side of me pointed out that it wasn’t necessarily about trust. I was weak. He had consumed not just a shard of my power, but the entirety of my brother’s Divinity. It should

have killed anything that was not Angelic. I wondered what he had done with it. I didn't get the same frenetic sense of power as I'd felt on the school roof. Had he stored it? Neutralised it? Disseminated it? What did a creature do when they became the strongest in their realm?

I blinked away. He would probably wake soon. Already he shifted, brow furrowed as his arm stretched across the bed, searching.

Well. Trying to leave through the door to the room was pointless, I'd already established that. Maybe I could find something useful in the myriad of ancient objects he had littered around, piled up against the edges of the room.

He really could do with organising a bit, I thought. How did he ever find anything in these mountains of glittering, twitching things? My skin prickled as I looked around. I didn't like that he could wake at any moment to see me picking through his belongings. He'd probably just laugh, but I think I'd find that more irritating than if he got angry.

I would try his dressing area first, I decided. It was a separate room off to the side, through an arched gap in the wall (of course with no door), that I'd discovered when I'd first woken up here. I headed over, footsteps as light and quick as I could make them.

Like the rest of his chambers, it was a mess. The stone floor was covered with swathes of bright fabric and broken jewellery that had probably originally been housed in the large wooden wardrobe that took up most of the far wall. I'd never actually seen Riddle wear anything but loose black trousers—even at the Games he'd gone bare-chested. Then again, I didn't think many residents of Hell cared much about social decency.

Quietly, I grabbed a loose white shirt from where it was draped over the back of a chair. My back was still tender, a canvas of forbidden runes free for anyone to stare at. It left me feeling oddly exposed. And, if I was honest, I was having to force down the insistent urge to walk back across the room and slip under Riddle's arm. It was the ritual that had me craving skin-on-skin contact with him—I knew it was. Hopefully his shirt would be enough to dampen it, a tease of his scent carried in the fabric. I was resolutely not thinking about his lips on mine, how his tongue had felt—

My eyes caught on a flash of movement.

A mirror. Propped against the wall in the corner. The tarnished glass was split by a crack that ran diagonally through it, and its golden frame had definitely seen better days.

I leant in, morbidly curious.

A pale, thin man stared back. His features were whittled down, green eyes darkened to flint, hair black and glossy. A vague sense of horror crept through me. I barely looked like myself. I looked…

Well, I looked like one of them.

My muscles creaked as I moved. I was scared, as I turned to peer at my back. Scared to see what monstrosity I would find.

The breath whooshed out of me as the marks became visible.

Where my scars had been, two geometric circles were stamped on my shoulder blades, black with dried blood. I now saw why it had taken him hours to make the cuts. They were *beautiful*. Spirals, twists, elegant shapes that danced between each other. I twisted further despite the pain, trying to see. I could already make out tiny black dots under the skin, where the feathers would begin to sprout. Would they come out grey, as new demons tended to be, or black? Would they change me, these wings? I didn't feel any different. At least, I thought I didn't. I was still… me.

Wasn't I?

My reflection raised their eyebrows. "Braver man than I," I heard my own voice say. And then laugh.

For a moment I stared. *Why is everything in this place so—*

You know what? No, I thought. *Absolutely not.* I turned around and began to walk away. Shrugged on the shirt too, whilst I was at it. There was no way a talking mirror could be anything but another monster, trying to trick me.

And then my voice called out, quiet, but unmistakable: "I hear you're looking for something."

My feet stopped.

I stared at a broken clock on the wall and resisted the urge to curse. Out of everything it could have said—out of *everything*—why did it know the one thing that would make me entertain it?

Because it was Hell. And they were all remarkably prescient and evil and cunning.

With a deep breath, I turned around. Looked at myself, face split into an unfamiliar smirk. At least he looked exhausted too.

"How do you know that?" I asked carefully.

I—he—shrugged. "Word gets around."

But I hadn't told anyone! I forced my voice into a calmness I didn't feel. "So? If I *am* looking for something?"

Mirror-me bent closer, his face distorted through the crack. It was alarming. I almost felt like he'd be able to slip through, to come out and grab me. "I know a Seer," he said, watching me for my reaction. "They find things."

I had to stifle it, despite the heady excitement that had my breath coming quicker. "People?"

Mirror-me smiled. "Also people."

I stepped closer. So did he. “And how do I find them?”

He watched me, forest-green eyes so dark they looked black. “You just need to put your hand on the glass.”

I debated for a split second. This was *undoubtedly* a trap. But Riddle’s blood still thrummed through me. I felt more powerful than I had in a long time. I wasn’t scared. Hell was full of the hungry and the desperate—I was one of them now.

My fingertips raised, hands steady.

“Brave boy,” mirror-me whispered. He stared at my hands, hungry.

“Brave or stupid,” I muttered. The room felt like it was watching me, holding its breath.

I wondered, briefly, if Riddle was still curled up, face still serene, young.

My reflection smirked. “That too.”

Slowly, I pressed my forefinger to the cold glass, watching as mirror-me did the same. For a beat nothing happened: just a normal mirror, a normal, perfect reflection. And then a hand squirmed through the crack, pale, slender—*my hand*—and pulled me through.

I was spat out onto a Persian rug with such force that it stripped the skin from my knees. I had a few seconds to take it in: wood-panelled walls, imposing book shelves, a vast oil-stained map stretched across the wall in a language that was surprisingly unfamiliar to me. A study then—nineteenth century Britain if I wasn’t mistaken.

“What a surprise,” a deep voice said, and I realised I wasn’t alone.

Behind a great oak desk sat a man in a three piece suit, halfway through a cigarette. His face was half cast in shadow and a single blue eye was caught in the light, illuminated like shallow water. And fixed on me.

He was beautiful, which had me instantly on guard. Tousled bronze hair, straight nose, a sharp jaw… in fact, if I hadn’t known better, I would have said he was one of us, one of my siblings. Just oddly tired looking.

I got to my feet with as much grace as I could muster. Whoever this was—whether the mirror had been lying or if it truly was a Seer—I was going to get answers. I must admit though, I did feel a little awkward at his complete indifference at a fully grown man tumbling into his office out of thin air. Although, now that I looked, he had the same mirror as before propped against his wall too.

“Who are you?” I asked.

A plume of smoke lazily escaped his parted mouth, cast a white veil over him as he spoke. “My name is Zeb,” he said. “And you?”

“Harry.” There was no point in hiding it. Everyone seemed to know anyway.

“Harry,” Zeb seemed to consider the word. “Would you care for some tea, Harry?”

“Tea?” I blinked at him. This made a nice change.

“I’m quite partial to an Earl Grey,” he smiled conspiratorially. “And I am on my break, after all.”

The demon gestured me over to the settee on the side near the window. I followed him over, not quite sure what else to do. Was this some kind of game? Was he trying to lull me into a false sense of security—or was this really just his… tea break?

Zeb poured out two steaming cups from an elegant silver teapot, and I chanced a glance out of the window. I must have stiffened, but he didn’t say anything. There, in the distance, was a familiar clock tower, the pale clock face half swallowed up by the clouds. *Not far at all for him to come and fetch me…*

Zeb settled into an armchair, crossed his legs, and took a delicate sip.

“I’m sure you’re wondering,” he said. “The mirror was a gift to Thomas, a long time ago. But I suppose one has no need of a thing like that now if they can just use the shadows.”

Thomas. That was the third to have called him by a name I’d never heard. “You mean Riddle?” I asked.

He nodded.

“How do you know him?”

Zeb sighed, seemed to look even more tired, if such a thing was possible. “I work with him. I must admit, I’ve been curious to see what’s been keeping him so occupied. The rumour mill has been working overtime—I heard you made quite the impression at the Game.”

I swallowed. I’d yet to drink any of the tea—I wasn’t stupid—but right then it would have been nice to clear some of the dryness from my throat. Actually, I was glad I’d shrugged the shirt on before I left. Something told me as polite as this man appeared, he was dangerous. Not somebody I wanted knowing what Riddle and I had done.

“And what is the work that you do?”

Honey-coloured eyes peered interestedly over his teacup before his face eased into a smile. “Ah,” he hummed. “So you don’t know.”

I forced away the flicker of irritation. “Don’t know?”

Zeb seemed to find something about me amusing. He cocked his head, animal-like, and I noticed two tiny, curled horns nestled in-between his hair. “Thomas—Riddle, as you call him—is our new King.”

Silence stretched as I processed. I barely managed to control my reaction.

“I see.”

“After he stole the peripeteia he gained an impressive following. I would go so far as to say he is uniting a realm many previously thought un-unitable.”

I thought it had only been days since I had Fallen. But—from what the demon was saying it was more like *months*. “How? How is he doing that?”

“Well, the Games, for one. The Lottery… bringing back the Free Ball…all of that.” He put his teacup down and leant forward. His nostrils flared… could he smell the blood? Or was it my anger? “Allow me to explain a little about the place you now call home. The creatures here are ruled by one thing—and that is fear. And the thing they fear the most?”

I already knew what his answer would be.

“Power,” he said simply. “Which, I can assure you, Riddle has no shortage of.”

Riddle had created the Games. *Riddle* was the one amassing the army that had been tearing the mortal world to pieces, shredding through my brothers and sisters like paper. And now he was in me too, a poison running through my veins, stamped on my back.

Zeb laughed, displaying incisors I thought were just a touch too sharp. "You look quite incensed.”

He was right. Which meant I was losing control of the situation. Methodically, I took my emotion and shoved it away, deep down somewhere in a corner of my mind. *Get to a Seer.* The thought drove through me, the only thing I would allow myself to focus on.

“And you?” I made sure to look him in the eyes when I spoke.

“Me?”

“You work with him on this?”

The demon abruptly looked worn out again. “Indeed. All hours of the day—and night—particularly when he wants to swan off for a few days and forget that he is leading a war.”

“That seems unfair,” I said, pleased at how even my voice came out.

“It is,” Zeb said, and began to fiddle with a slim pack of cigarettes. And then he surprised me. “In any case, Harry. Let's discuss the real reason you chose to come here. You're looking for someone, aren't you?"

I nodded, although my fingers tightened around the porcelain. "The mirror said it could take me to a Seer.”

Zeb tapped out a slim white stick, and placed it between his teeth. “Yes, that was no lie. I can take you to one whenever you wish.”

He held up his index finger. A flame appeared, hovered over the top. The paper crackled as it began to burn, and he sucked the smoke up into his lungs.

“Let me guess,” I said. “You want a trade.”

Zeb breathed out a chuckle. Smoke spread, herby and thick. “Please, nothing so crass. A favour will suffice.”

Of course. I put the teacup down on the coffee table, fed up. “What kind of favour?”

“Nothing sordid. Just… a favour of my choosing, at a time of my choosing." Zeb’s blue eyes burned brighter, pierced into me. "I'm a rather methodical man, you see. I don't know you, beyond what I've heard, and therefore I don't know what you're capable of giving me. All I know is that you're someone Thomas is interested in. Which means you have my interest as well." He shrugged. "A favour is a logical solution."

I shook my head. “Just 'a favour' isn't specific enough.”

Zeb considered, puffed on his cigarette. “I promise it won’t cause any harm.”

Oh really.

He sighed at my look of dubiety. "Unfortunately Harry, you're not negotiating from a position of power here. I understand your feelings, I do. But I bought you here to see what all the fuss was about. Not to put my own neck on the line to take you halfway across Hell to find the peripeteia that Thomas resolutely does not want found."

I was suddenly glad I'd put the cup down.

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh please. We're both intelligent beings, of course you would look for it."

"And you'll… still help me to find it?"

“Things have been far too straightforward for Thomas recently. And, if I’m honest, I’m growing a little bored with all this *menial work* he’s been giving me. So yes. I will help you. I suppose I’ve already given up on my performance review this year."

We both looked at the clock tower, the clouds swirling around it. I tried to picture Riddle’s idea of a performance review. Probably some kind of horrible torture.

"Ok," I said. "A single favour."

I didn’t like it. It was a bad idea. But ultimately... it did give me what I want. This was the closest I'd been to finding her so far.

Zeb leant back in his chair, satisfied.

"But," I added, "it must be used within the month, and cannot cause harm to another being. In return, you will take me to your Seer, allow me to ask and receive an answer to my question,

and take me back to Riddle's home unharmed."

The smoke lingered in the air, as still as the man opposite me. He crossed his legs, pointed leather shoes gleaming in the light.

“Wonderfully put,” he said after a moment. “I accept.”

Hunger

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I was still shaky from Zeb's version of shadow travelling when the Seer appeared.

He'd pulled us through into what looked like the inside of a mountain. Great crags of rock surrounded us, and the light that fell through overhead was dusty and weak. It smelt strange too, earthy and metallic, so we must have been pretty far in. Two ancient columns sagged at the far end, where they disappeared into the gloom.

Earlier, when Zeb had noticed me staring, he'd explained: "Japanese. I believe it used to be a temple before we took it. And her."

And now the 'her' in question was in front of us.

The figure that emerged from the shadows was like no creature I had ever seen before, even after three days in Hell. She was short and squat, with a surprising amount of hair, and a great black tuft of it floated down to her back, reaching the grey loincloth that covered her hips. Small black lines were etched into her skin, giving her an oddly reptilian appearance. I watched them wriggle and wondered what they were.

When they popped open I realised.

Eyes. She was covered in eyes.

"Beelzebub," she crooned, in a girlish voice.

I froze.

Zeb smiled at her, although it didn't meet his eyes. "We've come for a reading," he said. "For the—boy."

I was having a hard time wiping the shock from my expression. The creature cocked her head at me, curious, as she lumbered forward with arms so long they nearly dragged on the ground.

I couldn't help it. After all, the identity of the demon I'd entered into a deal with had just been revealed. And I knew him. *All of us* knew of him. A God; one of the Seven Princes.

He'd called me 'boy', and he wasn't wrong—compared to him I was an infant.

"Oh come along Harry," the demon in question smirked. "Close that mouth."

Humiliation washed through me. Here was another enemy, someone that had killed and maimed and enacted such cruelty that he'd become famous for it.

But I needed him.

"He smells delicious," the Seer said shyly. It was unnerving, the way a hundred pupils swayed to fix on me.

"Yes he does," Zeb agreed, "but he's not on the table for today."

The creature pouted.

"Ah yes, forgive me. Introductions. Harry, this is Dodomeki. Dodomeki, Harry."

Dodomeki grinned to display a toothless cavern. "Do-do-me-ki," she repeated in a series of clucking syllables that echoed in the empty space.

I nodded and swallowed the dryness in my mouth. "You can… help me find someone?"

Her eyes flicked to Zeb. "Just a little taste," she said, ignoring me entirely.

Zeb smiled. "Don't be rude, dear."

She shrank back.

So she was afraid of him. To be honest, I was too.

"Chop chop," Zeb said.

Dodomeki's hair floated up around her as she bobbed her head.

I tried not to be too overt in my relief; memories of the harpy tearing into that endless place inside of me had began to bubble up. I was suddenly thankful I'd had the foresight to include a guarantee that I make it back to Riddle's home unharmed.

Her eyes blinked, all at different times. It was oddly hard to watch.

"The name?"

I tried to ignore Zeb beside me, how uncomfortable it felt to divulge a secret I'd kept for so long.

"Her name is Maya."

Dodomeki gave nothing but a demure giggle. "Of course. Let me see…"

Abruptly, the Seer plonked herself down on the ground in a stout heap, took a long, rasping breath, and began to hum.

It was an eerie noise. Too constant, too long, for anyone that breathed normally. If she even was breathing, I couldn't tell. She mumbled to herself too, I caught flashes of Japanese, but

nothing that made sense.

“Cat—paper—puffing—melody—*didn’t it?*—auspice—” and on and on the words went.

I didn’t really know what to do with myself but watch.

Slowly, the eyes on the body began to change.

It happened one by one: the pupils grew, spread like ink until there was no white left, just a thousand dark blots on her pale skin.

Her humming somehow continued through her strange speech, only now it was a rumble in the ground beneath us. For a moment I wondered if this was actually a volcano.

I jumped when her hand began to scrabble on the ground. She was stronger than I thought. Her nails clawed through the rock like butter, leaving burnt indents as she trailed her fingers left and right. I thought she might be writing, hieroglyphs of some kind, although I didn’t recognise the language.

Another few seconds and her hunched back straightened, as if electrified. It all stopped: the rumbling, her muttering, the bloom of her pupils.

Zeb leant forward, interested. “Well?” he asked after the silence had gone on for too long. “Do you have a location?”

Dodomeki looked up at us with her two normal eyes. She sounded dreamy, a little drugged. “You found it—are finding it—find it—at the Free Ball.”

Free Ball? It wasn’t something I’d ever heard of. I turned to Zeb. “What’s the ‘Free Ball’?”

The demon looked contemplative, stroked a lock of bronzed hair between his fingers. “It’s tomorrow night,” he said. “At Lucifer’s pit.”

A shiver ran through me. Another name I recognised. “That’s where Riddle put her?”

He shrugged, let his hand fall. “I suppose it makes sense. Somewhere others would be afraid to go… and none of us go near Lucifer unless it’s the birthday party.”

“You go to his birthday party.” I repeated, incredulous.

“It’s traditional,” Zeb said, as if it wasn’t a ridiculous notion.

Dodomeki began to shuffle herself back to standing, her loincloth shifting precariously. Her hundred eyes blinked closed again, the light reflecting off them winking out.

It seemed she’d had enough of us. With no further fanfare, she wandered back into the shadows, swaying a little. With a soft sniff, she disappeared into the darkness of the rock.

I shivered. “How do I get to the birthday party?” I asked, more to myself.

“Make a deal with Thomas,” Zeb said disinterestedly. "But I suppose I should warn you, Lucifer takes somewhat of a special interest in those like you." The way he said it made that sound like a very bad thing indeed.

“Is Lucifer really that terrible?” I asked, but Zeb didn’t reply.

He stared at a point behind me, and confused, I turned.

“Surprised?” Riddle asked me, voice cold.

He stood in the entrance to the cave, expression pleasant enough that I knew he was furious. I scanned him for any indication of weakness or pain left over from the seeding, but like this I couldn't tell.

Zeb smiled. “I can't say I am,” he drawled.

I was almost impressed with his flippancy, right up until Riddle appeared next to him and threw him across the rocky floor like a skipping stone.

“Cute,” Riddle said.

Dust rose up and gently steamed through the shards of light. Zeb groaned.

Riddle was on him again in a blink. With one hand, he dragged him up from his sprawl on the floor and shook him like a dog.

“I warned you about this, did I not?”

Zeb opened his mouth and Riddle slapped him. The noise echoed around us, repeated.

Riddle seemed to enjoy the way Zeb glared at him as blood trickled from his nose. “Well,” he prompted. “Are you deaf as well as dumb?”

Zeb coughed. “Thomas—”

Another slap. More blood, running down to his chin now. Zeb nudged it away with a fingertip, stared down at it disdainfully.

“He was mine,” Riddle said. “You went against my orders.”

“He came to me,” Zeb pointed out.

Riddle clearly did not agree.

A horrible squelching noise rang out, and a low grunt was forced from the other demon as Riddle shoved his hand into Zeb’s stomach.

Blood splattered to the ground, over Riddle’s bare feet. Zeb gripped onto Riddle’s arm as if to arrest it’s movement, white with the strain.

“Don’t you... think... this is an... overreaction?” He gasped.

I agreed. “Riddle,” I said in warning, stepping closer to them.

But he didn’t even look at me.

No, instead, the muscles strained in his arms as Riddle twisted his wrist and smiled. “I think I’ll eat you now,” he said, conspiratorially.

I wondered briefly if Dodomeki was watching us from the darkness.

My fledgling power unfurled a little, made me feel brave enough to close the gap between us, to take hold of Riddle’s shoulder. Zeb’s breath stuttered as it jostled the hand inside him.

I felt a little sick at the familiarity of the image.

“He’s right,” I said. “I asked him to take me here.”

My words had a strange effect: Riddle froze in place.

Now he looked at me.

“You asked him,” he repeated softly, dangerously. His gaze flicked back to Zeb, who was beginning to look a little bit more sure of himself.

“Yes,” I nodded, gripped harder. “So take your hand out of his stomach.”

Riddle, to my surprise, did as I asked. I tried not to hear the sound as he pushed Zeb away.

The other demon fell to the ground, on hands and knees, and panted. The stone was wet with blood.

“You will tell me immediately,” Riddle said, “what the terms you used were.”

“…No ,” I said calmly.

Riddle snorted and a little thrill of fear ran through me at the noise. “Fine. I’ll look myself.”

I wasn’t quick enough to stop his fingers. Two of them tapped my forehead, and an odd sensation breezed through me, like a cold gust of wind.

Riddle leant in and stared, without blinking, for a beat or two, right into my eyes. I found I couldn’t close them, even though I tried.

After a moment he huffed—I felt a whisper of air against my face—and lent back.

“You’re wide open with that. A *favour*? Jesus, Harry.”

I raised my chin, defiant. “I needed his help.”

“No, he said slowly, like I was an idiot, “you didn’t.”

What was it about him that got to me so easily? I had once been famous for my even temper. And now—now I felt out of control with how suddenly anger rose up inside me.

I threw off whatever it was that he'd done—surprisingly easy— and grabbed his hand from where it was loose by his side.

"Wh—" he jerked backwards, but he was too late.

I bit down. His eyes went wide. Copper filled my mouth, and the moment it did I felt my power come alive, the seeding activated properly now, as he said it would.

It was like a shock to my heart. My whole body gave a great *thump*, and then I moved. Hurled Riddle out of the way to stand in front of Zeb, protective. My movement were fast enough to thrill me. This—*this* is what I'd been missing.

"I won't let you kill him," I told him.

Riddle's hand had already healed but he still bought it up in front of his eyes to look, incredulous. He shook his head and grinned.

I wouldn't say it was a particularly nice grin.

"You're defending him? Do you even know who he is?"

Behind me, I could just make out Zeb raising an eyebrow. He stood with a bloody hole in his stomach, red teeth; how was he so calm?

"Beelzebub," I said, and tried not to show my discomfort.

Riddle rolled his eyes. "Well clearly. But you're missing the point. How about now?"

He made a cutting motion with his hand, and suddenly Zeb's visage flicked. For a moment I saw a bull's head. Twinkling blue eyes. They were familiar. I'd seen them only yesterday, after all.

"You," I said distantly.

"Oops," Zeb said calmly.

I stepped away from him, backing away until all three of us formed a rough triangle. "I don't understand. Why help me?"

Zeb pressed a hand against his leaking stomach and winced. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you tried to *eat me*!" A strange pressure was building in my chest. Rage, maybe.

"Can you really blame me?"

Whatever it was, it boiled over.

Zeb began to splutter on the ground, clutch at his throat.

“Finally you do something that makes sense,” Riddle spoke up. “Cutting off his insipid voice. Do you know how open your bargain was?”

“I told him it couldn’t cause harm,” I said shortly. I was half-horrified at what I was doing, half-gleeful, which in turn made me more horrified. I turned to Riddle, a little desperately. “How do I stop this?”

“You don’t,” he said. “He needs to die.”

“No he doesn’t,” I was getting frustrated at the same circular argument.

Zeb, meanwhile, had turned a curious shade of purple.

“Harry,” Riddle snapped. “‘*Not causing harm*’ is incredible vague. He could tell you to walk into a road right at the time you would be hit by a car. Technically, the act of walking into a road isn’t causing you harm. Still within the bounds of your deal.”

I forced calm upon myself, tried to remember how I controlled my own power, back when I had it. The hot feeling began to recede, and on the ground, Zeb began to draw deep, wheezing breaths.

“There would be no gain in him doing that,” I said.

“That you know of!”

Riddle was losing his temper; the smell of ozone and electricity had leeched into the air.

I’d had enough. The coil of pressure that I’d had around Zeb’s throat whipped out and latched onto Riddle instead. I felt the shock of it as it touched him, felt it almost steal over him, his muscles stiffen in response. And then he growled.

It was menacing. Wolf-like.

“Oh no you don’t,” he said, and stalked towards me.

Whatever I was doing, it was working. It slid under his defences—it wanted to go home, it recognised him.

Riddle’s visage began to change. His pretty features contorted, melted for a moment, like Zeb’s had. I don’t know if I felt horror or fascination, but either way—

He was frightening. He had a mouth with no lips, displaying two rows of sharp teeth, black horns twisted up out of his hair, and he had two hungry black holes for eyes.

I stared, shocked out of action. I don’t know why I was so surprised; I knew he was one of them, knew he had to be the worst, to be their King. But I’d never seen him look like this before. Never had such a stark reminder that he wasn’t human, and wasn’t one of us either.

At least the fear gave me some adrenaline.

Bind him, I rushed to tell my stolen power.

His teeth bared as he halted in place, sharp and gleaming like stalagmites. “You’re always so annoying,” he said, the words contorted.

“As are you,” I snapped, although my breath came shallow.

He wasn’t resisting, which worried me. Instead he loomed on the spot, passive as shadows looped around him, began to suck his power out.

I turned to Zeb, energy running through my veins.

I’ll admit I enjoyed the surprise on his face.

“He—he gave you that?” He asked doubtfully.

I nodded, mouth pressed into a line as I walked over to him. “Take me back to his home,” I said. “We need to fulfil the deal.”

I reached out, intending to help him to his feet so he could use his shadows to get us out of here.

“Don’t. Touch him.” Riddle hissed. Those black pits stared into us.

Zeb actually jerked backwards, away from me. Concern was laced through his expression. I suppose I could understand: Riddle had just ripped a hole through his torso with nothing more than a flick of his wrist.

But I done with the theatrics.

I rolled my eyes. “Or what,” I said, and grabbed Zeb’s shoulder.

The demon flinched, but stayed still. “He’s correct,” there was a trace of nerves in his voice. “If I don’t return him, it will contradict the bounds of the deal.”

A burst of energy from Riddle had the shadowy vines around him budding, blooming into large black flowers as it gorged itself. I ignored him, although my head was beginning to hurt. He could struggle all he liked; I could hold him in place.

“Let’s go,” I told Zeb, helped him get up to standing.

He was still hunched over. “I liked this suit,” he said mournfully. The tweed was, undoubtedly, ruined.

Riddle laughed.

There was a black spot in my vision.

I blinked, unsure, as my teeth began to chatter. Zeb watched me, expression betraying nothing, as I released him and took a halting step backwards.

“What are you doing?” The question was directed at Riddle.

His terrible mouth split into a terrible smile. “Giving your little plant what it wants.”

Only then did I notice the black petals on the floor. The buds were dying, stretched to their fullest, and had begun to wilt.

But… he hadn’t done anything! I would have felt it.

“I hate to give unsolicited advice,” Zeb said quietly. “But personally, I would not have set something which consumed power on a creature like that.”

It sunk in. I’d overfed it?

Zeb looked blankly at me. “You poisoned yourself,” he explained.

I took a deep breath in through my nose and felt for my power. It was true: it felt sluggish, fried, and only sputtered when I tried to pull on it. I, on the other hand, felt hollow.

It seemed Riddle’s patience had run out. He shrugged off my binds like they were paper, and stretched great black claws up towards the sky in a stretch. With a shake of his head, his normal countenance was restored—those two black holes reduced to a normal size, his lips reappearing. He had a flush on his face.

I began to feel a distinct dread.

“I think I’ve been too lenient,” he said as he came closer. “Don’t you agree?”

Zeb sighed.

“Back off,” I snarled.

“It’s my own fault,” he said, continuing his irritating monologue. “I suppose I just got over-excited.”

“You tried to kill him!” I said.

“So?”

“I’ll try not to be offended,” Zeb drawled.

Riddle laughed and snapped his fingers.

In a blink, he had an iron grip on the back of my neck, fingers still sticky with Zeb’s blood. I didn’t have time to push him away; Zeb was suddenly in his other hand.

It was like falling into a cold bath, as we were sucked into the shadows.

We tumbled out in that never-ending hallway. Zeb went flying; Riddle’s punishing hold made sure I was on my feet.

“There. Deal parameters met.” Riddle suddenly seemed much cheerier than he had before, the anger replaced by a strange kind of happiness. It was somehow worse.

“Now,” he said, and turned to Zeb, “ask him to blink.”

Zeb seemed put out, but dutifully turned to me. He opened his mouth—

“Consider this my notice,” he said.

Both Riddle and I stiffened as a shadow flickered to life.

There was no time to react. Zeb slipped into the blackness, and it winked out.

Riddle and I stood alone on the tiled marble.

His grip on my neck tightened until I hissed with pain, but to my surprise, he only chuckled.

“How fun.”

I pushed Riddle away. Or, at least, I gave it a good effort.

It had no effect. He peered down at me.

I think I’d been right before. Although he smiled, I could read it in his face: he wasn’t angry. He was *furious*.

“Riddle—” I began.

My vision flashed, wind on my cheeks.

Somehow we were now in his room. I was falling through the air, back onto the bed I’d crept out of. It was still rumpled, sad little candles stumps still moulded to the table and floor.

“Harry,” Riddle said sweetly. “What the fuck was that?”

My back slammed against the mattress, hard enough that it would have hurt, even if I didn’t have two open wounds.

I didn’t have time to get my bearings, to even struggle.

The next second he knelt on my chest, a punishing weight. Loomed over me. I remembered his other face, the terrible one, and nervous sweat began to bead on my palms, my back.

I swallowed. “Calm down,” I told him.

What was he going to do?

“I’m exceedingly calm,” he said. “Now *stay put.*”

And just like that I did.

Riddle leant down, ran his eyes over me. He cupped my face, trailed his claws over the rise of my cheek.

“What did you ask the Seer, Harry?” He was gentle. It was terrifying.

I shook my head.

“Hm?”

“It’s none of your business,” I forced the words out.

“Ah,” Riddle said.

His palm stretched over my jaw and held it in place.

“A question for you,” he said, changing tack, “and you’ll like this one. Of all His creations, which one do you think is the cruellest?”

Seeing as I could barely move my jaw, I just glared.

“Pride… pestilence… violence…” he smirked. “No. If it’s the *cruelest*… then I think it’s this one right here.”

The tip of his claw descended, hovered above my left eye, a centimetre away. My vision cut off, swamped by darkness.

Now I really did try to struggle.

“Riddle—” I fumbled, bit my tongue as I tried to get the words out.

He shushed me, gentle. “All alone in its socket…" he clicked his tongue. "It never quite realises there's another right there, inches away, just the same; just as hungry, just as empty.”

I don’t think I breathed. Was he going to take my eye? If he wanted to, he would.

“Please,” I said, my voice cracked. I hated that word now. He’d made me hate it.

He hummed. “I like that. Say it again.”

Under him, my chest rose and fell like a humming bird. My muscle strained in a futile dance.

He leant close, nosed against my jaw. “I said *say it again*.”

I think my eyes were wet—maybe I was crying, I didn’t know. I waited for the pain as he blinded me.

“Please.”

Riddle drew his finger back. Stroked my cheek with it, tender. “You’re not going to run from me.”

It wasn't a question. I twitched my head in a nod anyway.

"Because, Harry, although you're clever and bright and quick, you are not of this place. And you will never be able to best me here. And certainly not with my own power." His wings unfurled around us. Two curtains of darkness.

How did I get him off me? I felt so unstable, pulled on a pendulum of fear and triumph. It left me ragged.

I didn't reply—I didn't think he wanted one.

"Good," he purred. He left me to stand at the foot of the bed. "Now, before I forget."

I pushed myself up on unsteady hands. I felt sick, kept having to blink away the water in my left eye. *How had this all gone so wrong?*

It hadn't, I reassured myself. I still had that piece of information—that she was at the Free Ball. I was still closer than I was before.

But now Riddle suspected.

He snapped his fingers and my head jerked up.

A loud *pop* sounded out. A woman appeared out of the air, sprawled on the ground. She was bound with rope, and bloody cuts littered her body. She stared up at us, and I realised she was about sixteen or seventeen.

"Hello." Riddle said pleasantly.

"Where is this?" She sounded afraid. Afraid and angry.

"Do you know why you're here?"

"Fuck you," the woman snarled. Her brown eyes flashed to me. "Who is he?"

I still trembled on the bed, filled with foreboding.

"Harry," Riddle said. But he wasn't answering her question, he was calling me. "You're going to eat now."

The woman froze. I did too.

"What?" I said, as she came back to life and began to struggle, the sharp bones of her shoulder sticking out as she sought to free herself.

"Thomas," she hissed, voice thin. "You can't be serious."

"Come on." Riddle hoisted me up, deposited me on my feet in front of her like it was nothing. "Your prize remember?"

I shook my head. "I'm not doing that."

Riddle sighed, murmured to himself. “Every step of the way, huh…” He rolled his shoulders. “No matter. Let’s make this simple then. You are going to eat her, or I will make her suffer.”

The woman’s face bleached of colour. I tried to call for my power. It weakly reared its head. Poisoned indeed. How could I have been so stupid?

“No,” I said.

He shrugged. “Then this is on you.”

The sound that filled the room wasn’t human. The womans eyes went wild and white around the edges as she screamed and screamed. She thrashed in a way that I was sure managed to dislocate her arm

“Stop,” I shouted, grabbed him.

He wrapped an arm around my shoulders, conspiratorially. “This was avoidable, you know,” he said over the noise. “I wasn’t really going to enforce it. But now there’s a demonic prince out there who you owe a favour to. So really, you need the strength.”

I pushed him back, dropped to my knees. I didn’t know what to do, all I could think of was to try to still her, to stop her from smashing her head on the ground. But she just cried harder, one of her flailing legs catching me in the stomach. I fell back, winded.

“Please,” the word was torn from her, raw, “stop, please!”

“Riddle,” I snapped. Tried to scrape together my power again. Couldn’t. “This isn't going to work, let her go!”

Riddle tutted. “This is your decision.”

My eyes were damp. I felt so frustrated and powerless, and *sick*.

“I’ll do anything else,” I said, desperate. “Anything—”

“As fun as that sounds, you have two choices here. You let the pain eat her up, or you end it.”

I fell back. I don’t know if I was breathing. Each sob, each moan she made felt like a knife in my stomach.

I lasted twenty minutes. Twenty, horrifying minutes.

It was when she crawled to my feet, begged me for death, that I broke.

Riddle came to stand behind me, a warm weight. “I’ll help you,” he whispered into my ear. “If it’s hard, Harry, I can help you. But you have to eat, alright?”

My cheeks were wet and my mouth tasted like blood as I nodded.

I'd kissed him, I couldn't help but think. I'd kissed him, right here, only hours ago. And I'd *liked it.*

At least it was quick after that.

I stared, half-unseeing, as he reached over inside her for that light. She was definitely an upper demon—it was surprisingly bright, a soft, glowing coal that he drew from her ribs.

Her cries cut off. Her eyes went dusty and dead before she vanished, stolen by Riddle's shadows.

I let him press it into my mouth with slippery fingers. Felt the heat of it burn my throat as I swallowed. Fell into that swarm of frenetic energy as it sent electric shocks to the tips of my fingers, my nose, my toes.

Yes, I felt immediately stronger.

But I no longer had the will to do anything with it. I felt dirty. Humiliated.

And so when Riddle left, pressed a kiss to the top of my head, I just sat on the floor. Stared at the innocuously clean patch of stone on the ground.

And I wept.

Chapter End Notes

A dodomeki (百々目鬼) is a Japanese yōkai that's depicted as a human woman who is cursed with having long arms covered with hundreds of bird eyes. The long arms reflect the Japanese belief that a person with long arms has a tendency to steal. The bird eyes are a reference to the Japanese dōsen, a copper coin with a hole in the middle of it that's commonly known as the chōmoku (Birds eye).

Beelzebub (Zeb for short lol) is one of the seven princes of Hell. The source for the name Beelzebub is in the Books of Kings (a book in the Hebrew bible), written Ba'al Zəbûb (Baal meaning "Lord" in Ugaritic). In one understanding Ba'al Zəbûb is translated literally as "lord of the flies".

Part of me wanted to write him in as a hypochondriac because of this, but I'm trying not to rewrite things (as otherwise that's all I do lol)

The Beauty of Hell

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I stared at my hand: a round white belly, five thin limbs. When I blinked I felt the acute sensation of my eyelashes brushing together.

“Come on…” I whispered.

It had been a whole day. He’d left me here alone for a *whole day.* Probably because he wanted me to do exactly what I was doing…

I needed to get up. I knew I did. It’s just somewhere between the urge and the action, it got lost. There was now a new weight in my chest that pinned me down. Whoever she had been, that poor woman, she was buried under my skin in a cold, resentful lump. Riddle was in there too, had pounced on the new power as soon as it had slipped down my throat, coiled around it possessively.

I couldn’t help but feel bloated, gluttonous. Like I’d swallowed them up. And really, that wasn’t even the worst part. The worst part was that it felt—

It felt *good*.

I stared at my fingertips. There was definitely grey at the edges, near my nail beds. Would they turn into Riddle’s sharp black points? How many more would I have to consume for that to happen?

And then, as if summoned by my thoughts as it used to be, suddenly he was there. *Finally*. A part of me was relieved. But I wanted anger—anger was an excellent distraction. Better than this weird cold hopelessness that kept rising up inside me.

“Alright,” Riddle said. He was looking at me peculiarly. “Enough moping.”

I deigned not to respond, although I let my hand drop back to my side.

“Come on. We’re going to have a little talk, you and I.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere with you,” I said in a croak.

He snorted. “When has that stopped me?”

I mean, *true.*

I barely reacted as he touched me, pulled us into the deep darkness of his shadows. It was nice in there, for a second or two. I couldn’t feel anything, couldn’t see, couldn’t hear.

I think that’s why when we did tumble out, I was so taken aback.

Up until this point, I'd never thought Hell was particularly inspiring. I'd seen terrible places —rocks and cliffs and caves and a tangled industrial city.

Nothing like this.

We sat on the edge of a great, clay-coloured cliff. Ahead, savannah stretched out in a wide open plain of packed dirt netted with cracks. My feet dangled, weighed by gravity and suspended so high that I couldn't really make out much of the ground below. I should have been terrified, to suddenly find myself in such a precarious position. But I wasn't. If anything, I was awe-struck.

Sunrise here burned brighter than it did on Earth. Brighter and more shocking, like an aurora of fire that spilled out across the pale haze of the horizon. The colours weaved and sang through the sky, golden and warm and beautiful.

I don't think we spoke, for at least a few minutes. It wasn't intentional, I was just swept up in it, taking it in. Seeing something like this… it somehow reminded me why I was here.

I wanted to save my siblings, to help the mortals. Hadn't I already accepted my own sacrifice?

Eventually, Riddle sighed and turned to face me. The new sun, the way it threw raspberry light over his face, made his black eyes look even more void-like. "Do you think I'm a rational being?" he said.

I thought about it as I watched the morning crack open in front of us. "Yes…" I answered him slowly, "but that doesn't absolve you of your actions. I think you're rational enough to know that something is wrong. But you—you do it anyway."

Riddle leant back on his hands. "There you go again. '*Wrong*'… what makes it wrong?"

"What makes murder wrong?" I don't think I quite managed to hide the flinch as I said the word.

Riddle nodded. "Yeah."

It was so obvious that it was actually a hard question to answer. "Because every being has the right to live," I settled on.

"So does that make an eagle wrong, when it eats a bird?"

"That's different. An eagle needs to eat to survive."

"So do we."

"Down here? No, you don't. You eat to gain power—which you wouldn't need if you didn't have the rules set up the way they are. And back in the mortal world…" I shook my head. "Murder isn't a prerequisite for survival."

“I disagree. I mean, look, take the mortals. They created this whole framework, this whole *society*. Everyone pretends like they’re above it, but in reality they propagate a world where the weak suffer, where a huge chunk of people live out these terrible, painful lives and then they die, and they come here because they were never given another real option.

“There’s enough wealth in the world, enough ingenuity, science—whatever you want to call it—to have eradicated starvation, poverty, disease. But they haven’t done it, because it doesn’t benefit them to. And that’s what I can’t stand, the hypocrisy. At least we make them *recognise it*.”

I frowned. “That’s not about people being good. That’s about people being able to work together.”

Riddle levelled me with a look. “Well then doesn’t the fact that they *won’t* mean something? I don’t think altruism really exists. You all just pretend it does.”

I tried to think of another example. “You don’t think a mother looking after her child isn’t altruistic?”

“Harry,” Riddle said, and I had a sudden moment of deja-vu, of conversations just like this, in other times, other places. Riddle, the friend I’d had for thousands of years. Not the horrifying monster he’d now become.

“Mortals—and us—obey the rules of Biology. Why does a mother act selflessly for her child? Because it makes her feel good. She gets the dopamine, the oxytocin. Fundamentally, although the result might seem altruistic, she benefits because she’s doing something that she biochemically *wants to do.* I don’t know if that’s altruism—isn’t it more selfish than that?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. Despite myself, I could feel myself waking up with the debate. I wanted to come up with some cutting answer, some way to make him see sense, to stop him talking in riddles.

“So that’s your argument? That because true altruism doesn’t exist it means every creature is inherently selfish and therefore murder is acceptable?”

He pressed his thigh against mine, warm and solid. “I’m just trying to point out that the righteousness that your ‘father’ demands is not actually possible to achieve. It’s imposed—it’s not natural, it’s not how things actually work.”

Was it terrible for me to admit I had missed this? This verbal back and forth, of engaging with the kind of rhetoric that any other of my kind would have drawn their swords for? There was something thrilling about it.

Then I remembered the woman, and my smile sunk. “As I’ve said before, it’s about the choice. Choosing love.”

“But it’s a rigged choice,” Riddle pointed out. “Why allow evil at all?”

“God is not a—a dictator,” I said stubbornly. “There is free will, there must always be a choice.”

“If free will is so important, why punish people for making a different choice than the one He made?”

“Because,” I blinked, “He is *good*, He leads them to salvation.” It was almost automatic, the way the sentence came to my lips.

Riddle leant into me. His eyes lit up as he spoke, feverous. “Yeah? But what if He’s not good? What if He’s just powerful?”

I stared at him, a little shocked.

“God is powerful,” he said, words tripping faster now, “and power means you determine the narrative. We’ve seen it for years and years—I mean, do you know what they call Alexander now, the man that killed millions, maimed, burned, tortured?”

Yes, I knew. *The Great.*

“You can tell the mortals, tell yourselves that you stand for justice and peace and uphold the righteous laws of heaven. You can put it into books and art and ritual and you can make people believe it. But look around you, Harry. Anything that is born differently, or is unlucky enough to make a single mistake in their life—and not have the fortune to pay it off—you turn your noses up at! You throw them here, down in the trash where you don’t have to look and then go on carefully perpetuating your nice, hypocritical story of kindness and love. Simply ignoring a problem doesn’t make it go away.”

His eyes were black now. Black and intent on me. I swallowed, suddenly aware that I needed to be careful. Because, as much as I didn’t want to admit it to myself, there was a small, quiet part of me that agreed with him. Some of those down here, they were down here through innocence. They were set up to fail, and they had a lifetime of punishment because of it.

How would I react, I’d wondered, if I’d have woken up on this shore without Riddle? Feeling as cold and empty as I had. Would I have still upheld our commandments? Or would I have been so desperate to feel something, to feel warmth again, that I’d have done unspeakable things for any hint of Divinity I could get my hands on?

Riddles thumb found my cheek, his hand gently pressing until I faced him again. “Don’t you think it’s dangerous,” he said quietly, “to believe in something so wholeheartedly?”

It was small. The barest fraction of a movement, but I still flinched.

“I know you’re trying to convince me that what you do is acceptable,” I said quietly. “But I don’t agree. I didn’t want to kill that demon. I didn’t want to eat her. It was wrong.”

Riddle sighed. “Because you’re viewing this with a set of contrived morals,” he said softly. “Let go of it. Free yourself.”

For a moment we didn't talk. Around us, the colours of daybreak had faded and the sky was now a kind of ephemeral nothingness—gold, white, dust-coloured. The sun hovered near the ground as a small blazing coin.

"Do you see yourself as a God?" I asked. It was something that had been playing on my mind as we'd been speaking.

Riddle looked at me, surprised. "Huh?"

"You talk about God being powerful—imposing right and wrong. Aren't you the same down here?"

"I suppose in a way I am…" Clearly, he found this amusing. "Except I don't think I'm above it all. I just want to create something beautiful."

I frowned. "Beautiful?"

He turned to look at the sun, strong profile outlined in the light. It must have hurt, to look into something so bright. "This place can be beautiful. Broken things, terrible monsters, violence… these things can be beautiful too."

I thought about his wings, the sleek black feathers that rippled like dark waters. And I watched the way he stared so resolutely into morning, leant back on his hands, the graceful curve of pale muscle in his torso.

Maybe I agreed. I don't know. I was just—confused. It had all been so clear for millions of years. Easy. *God is just, God is right, His word is love.* I should have been outraged by his blasphemy, as I knew any of my siblings would have. But although I disagreed… I was still curious to understand. Did that mean I was already polluted by his power? Or was I the only one who had been forced to stop and listen?

"You want to save your child, don't you?" Riddle said after a minute or so.

I stilled. Swallowed. "You knew?"

"I am the master of this realm, of course I know. And I think you forget sometimes, that I know you, too."

My mind span. Surely this would make it harder to find her, if he was watching out for me to do it. I could have screamed. I wanted to crack open his skull, look inside and find his secrets. Somewhere behind that gaze, he knew exactly where she was.

"And you won't take me to her?"

He looked sad at that, somehow. "No," he said simply.

I wasn't surprised. I hadn't expected anything different.

He knocked his shoulder into mine. He was so tactile in this place—like a cat. "Will you let me show you what I mean?"

It took me a moment to realise he had gone back to our previous conversation.

“The beauty of Hell?” I was amused, although it left a bitter taste in my mouth.

“Just watch,” he said, and smiled.

*

Time must have worked differently in Hell. Or maybe it was just the sky. We’d gone from daybreak to nightfall in the span of seconds. Stars glinted above, flecks of bright stone in a calm black sea. Darkness enveloped the trees, the land around us, like a thin skin. There was nothing. In every direction; a vast plain of white sand, without even a scraggle of grass or the spine of a tree.

And in the middle of this nothingness: a huge, fireball of a bonfire.

Great black boulders hemmed it in, and around it (and indeed on top of the boulders too), hundreds of creatures milled. Some danced, some were fighting, some eating, some just talking. Monsters, human-looking *Others*, some with wings, some with horns, some terrible, some beautiful. They all wove together to form a writhing, roaring blanket.

And I realised, as we slipped into the crowd, that the vast majority of them were *drunk.*

The fire added its own melody to the ruckus: it spat and popped, chewed blackly on anything that got too close—namely the various meat that was roasting over it, and occasionally one of the dancers who slipped and swore.

I noticed a distinct sound, and reflexively turned, surprised. For a moment I stared, and then whipped my head back to Riddle, who was looking irritatingly amused. “You’ve taken me to an…an…”

He rolled his eyes. “I know you’re trying to say the word ‘orgy’ Harry, but your prim little angel sensibilities won’t let you. Well actually no, it’s not. It’s a… tradition, that we have this time of year.”

“The Free Ball?”

He looked at me, gaze narrowed. “No. But a celebration along those lines.”

I tried to hide my disappointment. “Right.”

“But,” he continued as he surveyed the crowd, “in any case I think it’s probably going to do you some good—when was the last time you got laid, anyway?”

I lapsed into quiet, stony silence.

He guffawed.

“What?” I said stiffly, and looked anywhere but at him.

“Oh come on,” he prodded, “when was it?”

There was a particularly interesting creature that had caught my attention: a crocodile-like being with a woman’s face, the hair floating around her scalp made up of what looked like a buzzing cloud of flies. She tipped back her head and drank from a long horn, and—

“Wait,” Riddle said suddenly. “Oh *Harry,*” he was a mixture of scandalised and delighted, “does this mean you’ve never—”

“We don’t need to talk about this,” I said, rather desperately. “Why don’t we go and—”

“No,” Riddle said, although his eyes had gone somewhere into the distance, “how could I have forgotten? You’re one of *them*, there are so many things you haven’t….”

I made some kind of ungainly squeaking noise as my hand was clasped within his and he pulled me along.

“Have you ever been drunk, darling?”

I wished my cheeks would understand that it didn’t help me in the slightest when they gave away my feelings so easily. “No,” I said mulishly.

He laughed. “Perfect.” The heat from the fire made his cheeks pink too, at least.

The crowd parted before us as he led us through, although I don’t know if it was because they’d recognised him, or if it was just a side-effect as his power leaked out.

I couldn’t help but think about the kiss again, about how that was the first time I’d felt like that. Was sex the same, that heady, consuming rush? The mortals always said it was *more*, but I didn’t understand how. And alcohol… I’d drunk it before, certainly, particularly back when I was mortal and it was just the same as water. But I’d never been physically able to get drunk. Now, with this form—yes, I probably could.

What was that like, being drunk?

It would seem I was about to find out. Riddle had swiped a chalice-looking object from a table that I was 99% sure had materialised from nowhere, and pressed it into my hands. I accepted it automatically, and stared down at what was apparently an empty cup.

Riddle grabbed one for himself and then tapped on the rim of mine with a single finger.

“Go on,” he said.

Red liquid materialised in the bottom, a shimmering bead (iodine-coloured in the firelight), and then lapped up and up at the sides until the cup was full.*The blood of Christ*, I thought,

and then felt guilty enough that I took a large swig. It was sweet and spicy, and burnt my throat a little.

I quite liked it.

“That’s it,” Riddle patted my back and took a drink of his own. “Now come, let’s watch.”

Again, we made our way through the people. It was a cacophony of feeling, this strange, deserted party. Sweet fragrance, like jasmine and caraway seeds floated through the air, but so did a thick, meaty smoke, the smell of sweat and spilled spirits. Drums beat out a steady rhythm, interrupted by a zipping fiddle, and a tapestry of howls and shouts wove together as various people sang their hearts out.

The firelight threw a glow over us all, and tiny lights drifted above until they came too close to what looked like a family of anthropomorphised frogs, which would summarily whip them into their mouths with long, taffy tongues.

I flinched as I saw it, and Riddle snorted, threw an arm around my shoulders.

“They’ll be back,” he said into my ear, “look.”

True enough, the frog sneezed, and the tiny white point of light shot out of his nose. I could almost hear the faintest “*wheee!*” as it scrambled up on the air currents to rejoin the rest of them.

“They’re playing,” I realised.

“Oh? I didn’t realise you knew the word.”

I turned to him, unimpressed, but his face was hidden as he took a swig from his drink.

Coward.

I took a swallow from my own. I suppose it shouldn’t have surprised me that Hell had good wine. And wasn’t that a surreal sentence to think? I wondered what the Harry of a thousand years ago would have thought if someone told him he’d have Fallen and ended up drinking wine with an Other down in Hell.

“What’s that face for?”

“What face?” I said, distracted, as Riddle gestured for us to sit on some kind of shadow bench that he’d summoned up from nowhere.

“I don’t know. You look weird.”

“Just thinking about how strange this is.” At his look I gestured around us with my cup. “All of it. This. Us.”

“Us?” He did that thing again, where he’d managed to worm closer without my realising, close enough that I could see the wine staining his lips.

“My eyes are up here,” his voice was soft, amused.

My gaze flicked up to meet his. Why did he have to say it like that?

“So,” I said in an attempt to play off being called out, “this is your beauty?”

Riddle gave me a smile that told me he knew exactly what he was doing, but turned to survey the sight before us anyway. “You don’t agree?”

I swallowed down my instinctive retort.

This place can be beautiful. Broken things, terrible monsters, violence… these things can be beautiful too.

Instead, I drank my wine, and I looked.

Looked at the bloody fight going on on the other side of the fire, the jeers as someone drove their fist into a nose, crimson spraying out, the excitement that saturated the air, the heave of the losers chest as his grin stained red. Saw skin, slippery and gleaming, fingers dimpling flesh as two—or three?—writhed together in ecstasy. Couldn’t drag my eyes away from dancers, the different movements all weaving together, the way the partners would break away, giggling with delight, just to rejoin.

Was it beautiful?

I didn’t know… what had beauty always meant to me? I thought of pristine marble, the still, graceful silence of the church, the quiet bud of dew on a flower at dawn. People of all ages, all cultures, joining together in prayer, united in goodness, in a community built and trust and love. Food shared, voices raised in adoration, singing of His triumph.

God, Faith, Heaven—was beautiful. I knew it was.

But there was something in this freedom, a different kind of awe. Something in the way it pressed at my understanding of emotion and thrill, and pushed until it cracked open to reveal something new, something exciting.

“Do you see?” Riddle murmured.

I found myself nodding. “Perhaps a different kind,” I conceded.

“Beauty because it dares.”

The words sounded strangely familiar, and it threw me off a little. “Yeah.”

The music changed. The clash of noise began to shrink into a single tune, until the drums throbbed in sync and the choir deepened too. Shouts rang out, beer sloshed, and some collapsed the ground, exhausted, content to watch the remainder.

Riddle’s chest vibrated behind me as he chuckled. Our shoulders now overlapped—was it me, or had the bench shortened?

“Why do they call you Thomas?” The question slipped from my lips with such ease that I peered into my cup. The level of wine in it hadn’t changed, although I must have drunk through it once over by now.

“Ah,” Riddle hummed. “Yes. Thomas is the name I go by here.”

“Yes, but why?”

He smiled. “It’s the name I picked.”

“Why not Riddle?”

His eyes met mine, suddenly serious. “Because you gave it to me,” he said simply. “It’s mine. Not theirs.”

I didn’t know how to reply to that. "I think I might be drunk,” I said instead.

It was true. The world had taken on a pleasantly blurred feeling. I might have swayed a little —our shoulders bumped.

He smirked back, ran his eyes over me. “Maybe,” he agreed.

I eyed my cup with suspicion. “Really?”

“Drink some more and find out,” Riddle winked.

Well that was a clear as indication as any. I put the cup down on the ground. “No thank you.”

I couldn’t help but feel a little put-out. Why was he laughing?

“Unbelievable,” he muttered to himself. He turned to face me fully, put his hand on the bench near my thigh so he could lean in. “You’re always so stubborn, aren’t you?”

I didn’t like how fond the words sounded.

“And you aren’t?”

“Well at least I’m supposed to be.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. “Thanks. Great to be reminded, you know, that I’ve gone and ruined myself.”

“Harry… was that sarcasm?”

Screw it. I picked up my cup again and drank from it, a long, deep pull. “I was never supposed to step off the path like this,” I said, suddenly morose. “I was never supposed to—”

“To what?” Riddle said. “Having a path is bullshit. What a ridiculous notion.”

“You don’t understand,” I said, frustrated.

“I do. I just don’t agree. There is no right path, there are just paths. There’s no *supposed to this* and *supposed to that,* you’re making it up. Just be free to do what you want.”

He was swaying forward, snake-like as he spoke. My eyes dipped to his lips again.

Free to do what I want…

Even if I wanted to kiss someone that I hated?

Ah. And there—I’d said it. Thought it. Was this the alcohol? I didn’t know. In reality, this wasn’t a new feeling, wanting to kiss him. I’d wanted it for—eons. I just never, *ever* let myself admit it… and I think he knew that.

His eyes burned into me, daring me as he waited, patient. “Go on,” he murmured.

The noise of the musicians, the shouts and the revelry around us faded away. It felt like we were in our own bubble, under the sea somewhere, or back wherever it was that Riddle had taken us as he sewed himself into me.

As soon as I thought of it, my shoulder blades prickled.

Did the part of me inside him call to me as mine did?

I decided not to think. I wanted to be free, like he’d said. Free to press my lips against his, free to feel the way his hands would pull me in.

Free.

Yes—that’s what it had felt like before, kissing him.

So I leant in and took his mouth with mine.

This close his power crackled on top of his skin like electricity. I could smell smoke and copper, feel his muscles shift under my hands. There was something else now too, something different from before, an insistent tug in my stomach, a bubbling need to get closer, to press our skeletons together until it hurt.

It took him all of a single second to yank me in. I found myself sprawled half in his lap, distracted entirely by his tongue in my mouth. Teeth tested my lips, biting until I gasped and he pulled away, sucked heat into my neck, my jaw.

“Harry,” he said, into my skin. “God, you don’t know how long—”

I pulled him back to me by his hair, dark locks spilling through my fingers. I wanted his mouth, not his words. Like this, I felt powerful.

He went willingly. Kissed me back, greedy, hungry, shifted until our chests pressed together and I straddled his waist. And I could feel it, beneath me, a hardness—

“I’ve never…” I said, curious and a little frightened.

He groaned. “I know, I know you haven’t. It’s ok. I’ll show you.”

I think that woke me up. We were the middle of some strange Hellish desert, surrounded by monsters. There was absolutely no way I was taking this any further than I had already.

I wrenched myself away, watched the possession flare black in his eyes, his fingers dig into my waist to keep me. It was a thrill, to be honest. I knew he was obsessive; all of the *Others* were.

No, the surprise was that I wanted it.

He bowed his head until the crown rested on my sternum, and wound his arms around me. His wings were out, two dark monsters that floated behind him. Maybe that was why there was a clear dearth of people around our bench.

I almost, *almost,* asked him to take me back to his home.

“Um,” somebody said behind me.

Riddle’s body remained loose, relaxed around me, even as I jumped.

“*What*,” he said, and sounded very put-out.

I twisted on his lap. In front of us was a dark shape: another of his shadow minions.

Riddle sighed into my shoulder. “This is what they don’t tell you,” he mumbled. “That if you take over a realm there is *no peace*.”

The shadow squirmed, wrung it’s hands. “I’m sorry my Lord, truly, but it begins and, well, you told me to—”

“Right,” Riddle cut him off. “Clear. Now bugger off, will you?”

The shadow fled.

I turned back to him. “What is it?”

The world around me shifted as he stood, still with me clasped to his chest, and then deposited me down on my feet. He was taller than me, I noticed, with some dismay. When had that happened?

“Some warlords having a little feud,” he said tiredly. “Nothing that can’t be solved in five minutes. Wait here for me?”

I nodded, and then squinted as he opened his palm.

A small, pink flower. The same one as from the tree in his home.

He smirked at me, and tucked it behind my ear. The graze of his fingertips on my neck sent a shiver down my spine.

“Go and dance,” he said. “Aren’t you curious?”

I raised my eyebrows. “You’re leaving me unsupervised?”

“Well,” he scanned the crowd, “it’s got to happen eventually. And in any case, I think they should probably all be more scared of you than the other way around.”

I did a terrible job of trying not to smile. Yeah, I was definitely tipsy.

“Five minutes,” he promised me, “enjoy.”

As he disappeared into the shadows, the smile faded from my face.

There was no time to think about what I was doing with him, the kiss, the rest of it. If I did, I'd probably waste all the time I had; things moved strangely down here, but I was pretty sure the Free Ball was tonight. I had a suspicion it was also linked to this celebration. Maybe Lucifer’s birthday was celebrated across Hell, but only a select few were invited to the real thing?

I bit my lip, and slipped into the crowd.

What could I do? Dodomeki had seen me finding my child at the Free Ball. Did that mean it would happen regardless? Or was I supposed to take action to get there?

This was so frustrating!

I headed towards the fire, with the vague aim of finding somewhere to sit and scan the revellers. Actually, I decided, one of the large, pumice-like boulders would do nicely; it gave me some height, but also kept me out of the way of the fighting and the… the other things.

A huddle of squashed-looking stone gargoyles moved out of the way as I heaved myself up and settled on top. Like this, the flames were close enough to almost touch, a prickle of heat across my exposed skin, the smoke spicy in the back of my nose.

I stared into the firelight and tried to think through the fog in my brain.

Was there a way I could barter with Riddle to take me?

No, I just couldn’t see him agreeing. He knew that I knew she was there.

Wouldn’t he have to attend himself, as de facto leader?

Well, not necessarily. And even if he did, he could just leave me locked in his room again.

I sighed. Three minutes until he returned. I couldn’t help but feel like I was wasting them…

The fire sparked right in front of me, so close I could smell my hair singe.

My breath caught. Was I seeing things?

Because I was pretty sure there was a face in the flames.

For a beat or two it stared at me, two smoky holes for eyes and a long, snooty nose. Spindly fingers of flame rose up in prayer and then waved, as the face turned to look in another direction.

I couldn't look away, stunned out of my own thoughts.

The fire—it was a creature too. And it was *dancing*.

It was incredible. I had thought I'd known all of God's creations. But down here, there were so many I'd never seen before, so many I had no idea existed!

A great, flickering arm rose up again and seemed to thrust towards me, and its hot, shaggy head cocked.

I cocked my head too, confused. It really did seem like it was looking straight at me…

"Harry," said a voice from behind. It was more of a gurgle than a word.

I almost fell off the boulder as I whipped around. A gargoyle sat on its curved haunches, teeth bared in a permanent snarl. "Zeb sends a gift."

I was instantly alert. My eyes flicked around as I tried to make out the familiar tall figure. But the crowd was too thick, their movements too wild to see through.

The gargoyle held out its hand. In the centre of the cracked grey flesh was a single shard of black stone. Pretty ordinary looking, although the end looked sharp enough to cut.

"What is it?"

"An invitation," it said, "to somewhere you need to be."

It dropped the stone on my lap, and then closed its eyes. It almost looked like it had reverted back to stone, like one of the decorations the mortals used in their places of worship.

I picked up the 'invitation' cautiously. It was cold and smooth, and strangely heavy. As soon as it met my skin, it began to warm.

Could I trust Zeb?

What a ridiculous question.

But if this was an invite… how could I activate it?

The gargoyle suddenly spluttered to life.

"What the fuck," it snarled, and glared at me.

I stared back, shocked. "What—" I began to say.

“What the fuck did you do to me?” Its carved eyes were wide with anger and fright.

“I—didn’t do anything?”

It took a step forward, sharp talons now pointed in my direction. It was only about waist height, but it was made from stone after all. It would be a hard enough hitter that my back itched as my fledgling wings fought to display themselves at the threat.

“Yeah,” it shrieked, “you did! How did I get here?”

Behind it, the other gargoyles swivelled to stare at us.

“I have no idea! *You* walked up to *me*!”

“You fucking piece of—” the stone creature launched itself at me, teeth snapping.

It was quick, and I, in my shock, was not. Its sharp little fangs and claws raked across my arm in burning lines.

“Stop,” I cried as I struggled to push it off, but it just used its wings to propel itself back towards me.

Around us, people laughed at the show.

Five minutes, Riddle had said. I would feel pretty humiliated if he came back and saw this.

Frustrated, I called on my power. It leapt to me, eager and hungry, ran through my muscles into my hands. For a moment, my fingers flashed black and sharp, and then I shoved.

“Get off!"

Except I’d pushed too hard. The gargoyle flew back away from me with a scream, skidded right off the boulder, and shot into the fire with such force that for a moment it seemed like it had gone out.

“Shit,” it shrieked. Long fingers of flame reached around it. The smoky face split into a grin. “Get me out!”

I didn’t know what to do. Behind me, I tried to flare my wings, but they were small, not yet grown enough to fly. Panic plunged through me like icy water. I had to get it out—it was my fault!

But even as I tried to reach forward, into the heat, I saw black cracks thread through the stone of its body. One by one they pushed open, until the heat had torn through it like broken pottery.

The gargoyle screamed—as did its friends behind me—and then shattered.

A small puff of black soot exploded into the night air, and the fire continued to dance. I stared, uncomprehending. Blood dripped from my arms, and from a cut on my face where it

had managed to catch me.

“You killed him, you fucker,” another gurgelly voice shouted.

Nine or ten small grey bodies began to climb up the boulder, their sharp nails digging into the rock to pull themselves up.

“Now we’ll kill you,” another shrieked.

They would be on me in seconds. I whirled around. In front of me, the hungry, roaring fire, behind me, small creatures that were snapping their teeth and screaming. A few people looked on, amused, but the rest were lost to the revelry.

And then, like it couldn’t have gotten any worse, a familiar figure caught my eye.

Riddle was back, had slipped back through the shadows to where we had been sitting. He found me immediately, his eyes wide.

“Oh for God’s sake,” I saw his mouth move.

I took a halting step backwards, the heat licking on my back. The stone in my hand burned too, and I stared down at it surprised. Hadn’t it been colder earlier?

Silently, Riddle appeared next to me. He stared at the gargoyles, now frozen with their heads peeking up past the edge of the boulder, and with little fanfare began to methodically kick them off with his bare foot. “Really?” he said to me, eyes wild. “Five minutes?”

The creatures didn’t dare attack him with their talons. Instead their gravelly cries of fear faded as they dropped into the shadows below.

At a dark look, the fire also reared back at least a few feet. I hadn’t realised it had come so far forward.

“What did you do?” he asked. I think he’d realised from the lack of colour in my face that something was wrong.

“I killed one,” I said, numb. “I pushed it into the fire.”

Riddle snorted. “Good for you. They’re annoying little bastards, aren’t they?”

“No, I—” The stone in my hand suddenly flared with heat, too hot to hold. “Ouch,” I hissed and, uncaring of Riddle, I opened my palm to see it red and blistered. I tried to drop it but it clung to the skin, the blackness beginning to take on a strange, oily sheen.

Riddle grabbed my wrist, staring down with wide eyes. “Let it go. Now!”

And then the desert, the party, the fire—it all fell away.

Chapter End Notes

any guesses for where Harry's ended up...

btw i have a twitter @machiwrites - if anyone wants to chat on there :)

Freedom

Maya used to talk to me in her dreams. Did I ever mention that? It wasn't very often, probably once or twice every few years. Of course, she never remembered. But I did.

I wasn't *technically* allowed to do it. It was supposed to be for emergencies only. But how I could I not? Especially when she was grown enough to link words together, to tell me she thought my eyes were pretty like the sea and ramble on and on about the squirming inky tadpole she'd found in her neighbour's pond.

It was heady, to hear her ask me a question, to laugh because of something I had said. It was happiness of a kind that fills you up for weeks, that you steal sips from for years after.

How could I not love her?

I'll admit, the cynical side of me points out that of course I did; I watched her grow from a wriggling pink little thing into a bright, curious young woman. I saw every triumph, every tear, every moment where she gathered her courage and *did it anyway.* It's hard not to love when you see—when you understand.

But regardless, love her I did. She was mine, she was everything.

So it was her I thought of when I shuddered into existence, drawn from the spitting heat of the fire and into somewhere cold and dry. It was the memory of her bravery, of her smile that forced me to pull myself up tall, to calm the shock and panic that tried so hard to creep up my throat, strangle me with breathlessness.

You see, I found myself in a place that looked very much like Heaven.

I stood, sheltered behind a large china vase out of which erupted a delicate spray of white flowers, at least as tall as any man.

It was a ballroom. The ceiling was high and arched, with a glass opening at the top that let in a steady wash of moonlight. Chandeliers hung suspended from the shadows, and threw diamond chinks of light over the floor and the walls. Everywhere I looked was pristine white marble, like a crust of new snow over glistening ice.

But the people weren't my brothers and sisters.

Maybe fifty or so, dotted around in pairs or groups, dressed in ornate ballgowns and suits that paled in comparison to their own beauty. They weren't angels, these blank faced puppets. They were Others. Most held a delicate glass of what I thought was probably champagne, although it had a faint, mysterious glow. Shadowed waiters and waitresses slipped between them, topping up their drinks.

It was lovely, of course. But I still felt a shiver work down my spine. It was so… cold.

I turned around and threw up in the vase.

My stomach clenched painfully as I spat, my breath shaky as I looked around. Whatever that stone was, and however it transported me here, I don't think it had been too kind on my body—either that or the wine. My face felt hot and there was an insistent, unpleasant tug in my stomach. Despite this though, nobody around me even seemed to notice I was there. The cuts on my arms bled sluggishly, my body soot-smeared, hair probably wild. I was clearly an interloper… but nobody cared. Two men walked straight past me, so intent on their conversation that they didn't bat an eyelid.

"—considering we only see him once a year."

"Well I suppose the speech wasn't too bad for a recluse, no?"

"But did you think he'd pitch himself behind Thomas so overtly?"

"He doesn't really have a choice… Lucifer might be older but Thomas—"

They disappeared into the soft darkness that coiled around the edges of the room and I let out my breath, piecing it together.

This was, as I'd suspected, the Free Ball. My limbs felt jittery with anticipation. She was here! She was somewhere in this building, waiting for me!

Now I just had to find her.

I'd apparently missed Lucifer—a shame, I'd been curious to meet the first of my kind and was now even more curious to hear that Riddle had managed to persuade someone of his fame to follow him. *Did he share Riddle's view?* I wondered. *Did he find Hell beautiful too?*

I stepped away from the vase and looked around. This room, these people… they all resembled my old home more than anything I would have expected to find here.

So why I was no longer captivated by it?

I felt sick again. Suddenly I didn't want to be in this stuffy room full of icy, beautiful people. It was too white, too bright, too sterile. Where was the life? It felt like I was surrounded by corpses.

The walls felt like they were closing in, like all the air had been sucked from the room. Desperate, I scanned for an exit. There—on the other side, a glass door floated in a sea of shadow. I could just about make out what could have been a garden on the other side.

Outside would be good. Just for a moment, just so I could clear my head. And then I could figure out where to start searching.

With my head bowed, I made a beeline. It was better I remain as unnoticed as possible, particularly as I was sure Riddle would be arriving himself at any moment. Still, I was conscious of eyes on the back of my neck, the echo my bare feet made as they slapped

hurriedly across the floor. A small part of me did question why they weren't trying to eat me, like every other being had here. Perhaps that was against the rules for the Free Ball?

I reached the door with record speed. There was a dearth of people on this side, nobody to notice as I quietly pushed it open and stepped outside.

I found myself in a pretty stone patio overlooking the garden, which spread out before me in odd black shapes. It was dark; the night sky was a faded purple, with a full, gentle moon and no stars. Even the air smelled familiar: jasmine, mint, bergamot, all woven together and carried by the soft breath of the breeze.

My hands fisted down by my sides. I needed to get it together. Another breath, and another one, and little by little my sickness began to recede. The twist in my stomach remained, but at least I no longer felt full of hot, prickly panic.

Then the handle of the door turned behind me.

I took off, steps quick and quiet as I stuck close to the shadows that wrapped around the building. Behind me, the telltale sound of muted conversation cut off. Whoever it was had shut the door.

Riddle? Zeb? I wasn't sure which would have been worse.

I skirted the side of the building, heart rate calming as it grew darker and more secluded. Stone rose up to my left, a blank, monolithic wall with no doors. In fact, the only thing that I could see was an ordinary cobbled path that led out into the mysterious gloom of the garden.

I found myself following it without really thinking, the cobblestones cold and damp against my bare feet as it led me further into the darkness. Behind was nothing but a wave of black trees and the occasional patchwork of flower beds.

I must have only walked for a few minutes at most before I caught sight of a strange glass structure up ahead. It was tall and dome shaped, like a bird cage, held together by elegant gold arches that cut their way out of the shadows. A greenhouse? A smile flitted across my face. Somehow I just couldn't quite imagine Lucifer growing vegetables in his spare time.

Curious, I drew closer. The door was locked with a large, worn padlock, and from the outside I could only make out a smear of spindly grey shapes within. Rust flaked away like confetti as I trailed my fingertips over it. My power came easy now, eager to please: the metal bowed and crumpled to the floor.

The scent hit me as soon as I stepped inside. It was much stronger than the rest of the garden, like rotting soil, sweet somehow. Not a terrible fragrance, but it reminded me of being deep in a dark wood, where no sunlight penetrated, of mulch and the click of insects as they broke down wet, fallen leaves.

It made sense: I was surrounded by trees. Well—one type of tree to be exact. There were hundreds of them, all with the same pink blossom, cast silvery by the moon, and all… *twisted* somehow. Some were stunted, thin and etiolated. Some were freakishly tall, but with tangled,

intertwined branches that wove together like tumours. Some blackened and burned, some bleached. But all of them had the same, beautiful flowers.

I stood and stared in amazement, wracked my brain. Where did I know this species from? It no longer grew on the mortal plane, that I was sure of. So long ago… East Africa? But why was it here? And why were all of them so broken?

I stared. And stared. And then my heart stopped.

The largest tree, the one with a trunk the width of a house. There, at the top, tangled up in the flowers—was my child.

She slept. Still in her school uniform, her body unbroken, face peaceful at rest.

"…Maya?"

"Fantastic work, Harry."

I whirled around.

Zeb stood at the door to the greenhouse. Still in a suit, still with those glowing blue eyes, but now his horns were out in full, terrible glory, reaching up like two twisted knives from his curls.

"You," I said. This was not good. Not good at all.

"I don't really understand how it is that you can set foot inside," the demon said. His eyes were locked on my child, hungry. "But no matter. Really, this has worked out rather wonderfully."

I shook my head. Took a shaky step backwards, closer to the tree. "You can't have her."

Zeb looked amused. "That's not up to you, I'm afraid."

Adrenaline diffused into my bloodstream. I straightened, tall and resolute in a way that I hadn't been since I'd woken up here. "Go, Zeb"

His smile widened. "If you don't mind, I'd like to call in my favour." The words rolled smoothly off his tongue, easy. "***Let me in***."

Oh shit.

Something deep inside me wrenched. It was such a pull that I actually staggered for a moment, but it didn't let off there. The feeling widened, deepened, extended into all of my limbs.

"No," I tried to tell him, even as I took an involuntary step forward. My power rose within me, unwilling but moving all the same. "I specified no harm!"

"I don't want to harm her, Harry," he said, and then thought about it. "Well, maybe I do."

“Then it contradicts our terms!” But even as I spoke I remembered Riddle’s words.

Do you know how open your bargain was? ‘Not causing harm’ is incredible vague. He could tell you to walk into a road right at the time you would be hit by a car.

Zeb tutted, like a weary school teacher. “Clearly not, or you wouldn’t be doing it, would you?”

And he was right. My power surged up jerkily and flew towards the door. I don’t know what it was that prevented Zeb from entering but I felt it start to corrode, to be eaten away by the new energy that nibbled through it.

Three seconds. That’s all it took.

And then Zeb stepped over the threshold with his shiny, polished shoes, and was inside.

Something inside of me released. Our deal was done. It bought me no relief though; all I felt was anger, and fear.

“Harry. Sweet little Harry,” he murmured as he stalked towards me. Each step was measured, predatory.

I stiffened, shaking with rage, unwilling to budge even as he drew closer.

“You really don’t have any idea at all, do you?”

“Stay back,” I snarled. My power spilled across the air, unfurled like ozone and electricity. Like Riddle’s. I think we were both surprised, although the flicker of uncertainty that crossed Zeb’s face was gone in an instant.

He cocked his head instead. “You know, my brother always used to break his toys in the end.”

I blinked. “Brother?”

“Oh yes. *Adopted*, mind you. My parents, tutors, all loved him. He could get away with murder, that one.” He laughed, although it wasn’t a kind sound. “Frequently did.”

I couldn't quite wrap my head around it. He couldn't mean..."*Riddle?*"

Zeb laughed. "Oh yes."

They were *brothers*? But hadn’t Riddle tried to kill him?

I pushed away the questions that bubbled up, focused on Zeb’s slow advance. He was trying to distract me. “Why are you telling me this?”

He just laughed and looked past me to where Maya slumbered within her crooked nest, spine curled into a comma.

My hackles raised.

“Speak of the devil,” Zeb said, disappointed.

In front of us, Riddle blinked into existence.

I stared. He looked pretty different from the last time I’d seen him. Both his wings were out, two huge black teardrops by his sides, and his torso was splattered with blood, his hands drenched in it too.

His eyes found me immediately, mouth a thin line as he scanned over me. “Am I interrupting?” he said, but he sounded distracted.

“What happened?” I blurted.

Riddle looked down at himself and then snorted. “I’m fine. Zeb just sent some friends to play with, didn’t you?”

The other demon ran a hand through his hair and rolled his eyes. I could see it in the way he held himself though, he was on edge in a way he wasn’t before. “I take it you killed them.”

“What do you think?”

I had kind of expected them to talk more, for Zeb to gloat as he had with me. But it seemed they were both too keyed up for that.

Zeb’s face sank into an odd expression, like he was chewing something, and then he spat. A great glob of something grey and sticky arched through the air with a strange *hiss*, straight towards Riddle.

Riddle shifted out of the way easily, raised his eyebrows. The stone floor where the saliva had sprayed sagged inwards and melted with a small plume of white smoke.

Riddle wrinkled his nose. “Gross,” he muttered, and waved his hand.

A row of wicked-looking knives materialised from the air. Apparently of their own volition, all eight of them hurtled straight towards Zeb.

Shadows pooled in the air in front of him, almost like a vertical puddle. When the knives reached it, they simply disappeared inside, swallowed up. “Predictable,” he replied calmly.

I edged closer to Maya until I felt the reassuring weight of the trunk behind my back. She was pretty high up there, but if they were about to engage in a fight like this I wanted to make sure I could protect her.

But, as much as I hated to admit it, Zeb was no fool.

He spat at me next.

He'd perhaps been right about Riddle being predicable: the demon popped into existence in front of me, his wings outstretched, and waved it away with a look of utter hatred.

It was unnecessary—I could have deflected it myself.

Neither of us, however, had realised that he'd spat twice.

The second, delayed only by a second, landed right on target.

Riddle hissed with pain as the centre of his right wing began to steam. He shuttered it immediately, withdrawing it back into his body to presumably neutralise whatever it was that was in there.

But the damage had been done.

I didn't know if Zeb was aware that Riddle had seeded my wings. I'd been careful to hide the marks with a shirt, back at the cave with Dodomeki, so maybe he was just lucky. But either way, it was exactly where Riddle was most vulnerable. Given that he'd plucked his first feather, he was no longer able to heal any damage.

It would have hurt. His face had gone pale, and I could see the muscles in his back trembling.

Although, knowing Riddle, that was probably more from anger than anything else.

"You utter shit," he said.

Zeb gave a dark smile. "Get out of my way, Thomas."

"No, I don't think I will."

I watched them both, incredulous. I was starting to see how they could be siblings.

Until I noticed that Riddle's shaking had gotten worse.

It took me a moment to place it. Riddle's power was usually tangible; you could feel it settle over your skin, taste it almost. But now it was gone.

"Jesus, you little idiot," Riddle spat. Horns edged out of his head and his eyes descended once again into those terrible black voids.

"Oh you recognise it now?"

"What did he do?" I interjected, looking between them.

"He's put a block on my Divinity," Riddle said. He almost sounded a little impressed. "It's temporary, I'll eat through it in a few minutes."

"You can do that?"

Riddle nodded, but his focus was on Zeb. "I don't know what you bartered from Brutus to get this--"

“Irrelevant,” cut him off dispassionately. As he spoke, shadows darted out from behind, boa-constrictors with long, flickering tongues. In a moment they’d wrapped around both Riddle and I, looped around our wrists, necks.

I barely had time to take a single staggering step backwards before they began to squeeze.

Riddle’s hands transformed into wickedly sharp talons to slice through them, but it was useless. The shadows, for all the pressure they managed to exert, weren’t really physical.

I could push them away with my own power, but it was delicate. Their very nature meant it was more a task in finding the right frequency, the right balance between corporal and non-material, so I could meet them on the same plane of existence.

Which was hard to do, when you were slowly being strangled.

Zeb moved towards us, any branches that impeded his path turning black and crumbling away.

“You need to kill him,” Riddle choked. “Or he will destroy both her and you.”

The words echoed in my head. I grit my teeth, poured all my concentration into the shadows around my wrists.

There—I felt something give. I latched on to it, power bubbling up through my skin, and tore. The serpents fell away, writhed in a pantomime of pain on the ground.

Annoyingly, Zeb didn’t look even remotely threatened.

My hands curled into fear-clammy fists. “I don’t want to hurt you,” I said. But to be honest, at that point I wasn’t sure it was entirely true.

Zeb laughed, displaying extremely sharp white teeth. I swore I heard Riddle groan quietly behind me. “How sweet.” He reached out towards me, signet rings glinting like fat golden coins on his knuckles.

Riddle bared his teeth, and the muscles in his neck strained, but the shadows held him solidly in place. “Two minutes,” he gritted out.

I had already moved. I poured power into my hands, thought of my anger and my fierce will to *protect,* and pushed, like I had with the gargoyle.

Sound and light exploded out. Zeb slammed straight into the tangled web of a mutated tree, and the branches crumpled inwards with a great snap.

I smelled blood in the air, felt a little sick.

From the darkness of the undergrowth, something flashed. More of that horrible spit sailed through the air like a bullet.

I used my power to help me shift out of the way, faster than should have been possible—

—And again, when a wickedly sharp knife slammed into the trunk, right where my head had been. The vibration from the impact made it sound like the tree had let out an eerie groan.

It seemed he was taking a leaf out of Riddle's book.

I wanted to check on Maya, but there was no time. Zeb barrelled out of the thicket towards me. The skin on his face was blistered, like he'd been scalded, and blood eked from his mouth.

Had I done that? My power purred inside me, pleased.

"Give it up, Harry," Zeb snapped. "You still have no idea, do you?"

"Just fuck *off*," I told him. The curse felt pretty good, I have to admit. Very cathartic.

Riddle snorted but it sounded pained. "One minute," he said.

"I suppose it's time to stop playing," Zeb said.

He was faster than I was. I realised that pretty quickly when he flashed up in front of me and drove his fingers into the meat of my shoulder.

I gaped, breathless. I could feel his fingers *inside me,* a horrible electric grate as his hard nails scratched the bone. I think it was the worst pain I'd ever felt. I couldn't see and my vision flickered as he yanked himself free.

Something struck me hard across the face and I smacked into the floor.

How did I breathe? I tried to remember, tried to think through the ring in my ears. Was Riddle speaking to me? I thought he might be, but the words didn't make any sense.

Zeb's low baritone sounded out, and my vision coalesced into a single shiny brogue, next to my head.

Stop him! Something inside of me demanded. I reached inside, where the pain was, and *threw.* Light bloomed, followed by a startling heat.

I coughed, finally able to use my lungs, and looked up.

In front of me, Zeb was on fire.

I froze, on my hands and knees. I hadn't meant for that—I'd just wanted him to get off me, to leave me alone.

…Except that wasn't quite true, was it? Because a small part of me, a part I didn't want to admit to, wanted to make him *hurt*.

The flames that licked over him doused themselves as he staggered towards me. Forget just the horns; he was back to that fearsome bull-headed beast, back to the hulking figure that had chased me through a labyrinth.

"*Watch me eat him*," he said in that deep, inhuman rumble.

Behind me, Riddle let out a strange whistling noise. I looked back to see the shadows that bound him shrink, pull tighter across his neck. Quick as a whip they wrenched him straight to Zeb's outstretched claws.

"No," I yelled, horrified, as Riddle began to truly suffocate.

Zeb, clearly seeking a more personal touch, grabbed him by the throat. Riddle's legs kicked uselessly, bound arms thrashing. Zeb laughed, and with his other hand reached out to his left wing. Casually, he fisted a handful of sleek black feathers and *ripped.*

Riddle's nostrils flared with pain, and his visage flickered: back to the lipless beast from before. "Ha—rry," he gasped.

I lost my mind. I think that's the only explanation I have. Again, Riddle and I—we had a complicated relationship. But the level of anger, of pure loathing I felt when I saw his face crease with pain, surprised even me.

Zeb shook Riddle by the scruff of his neck and opened his jaw.

It all happened very quickly. I don't remember crossing the distance between us, but somehow I was there in front, and I'd buried the only sharp thing I had on me—the jagged shard of stone I'd used to come here—in the side of Zeb's neck.

His grip on Riddle wavered. Maybe it was surprise or maybe he really was just wounded, but it was enough that Riddle was finally able to croak out a word.

"Finally."

Three things happened simultaneously.

The air went cold.

Riddle's feet found the floor.

And Zeb's hand, the one that had been holding him, was suddenly detached from his body and appeared on the other side of the room.

Zeb *roared.*

Riddle was suddenly stood in front of me. I only saw snatches of his face, a slither of profile from behind, a smile. "This has been long overdue, *brother.*" His lips curled in a hiss around the word.

Shadows rose at the corners of the room. In my mind, they had been fairly evenly matched before, but like this… like this it was almost as if Riddle had been playing with him before.

It took all of a second for Zeb to be impaled on what looked to be a shadowy cross. His arms stretched out to the side in a T shape, and a thick band of black stretched across his neck,

immobilising his spine.The beast spat and huffed, eyes rolling until I could see the white around the edges. But there was nothing he could do. He was pinned in place.

Riddle grinned, and his eyes shone in a way that made shivers run down my spine. “Should I finish it?” he asked me.

I stared back at him. I didn’t know to say. It was a new power, this. I knew he would kill him, destroy him like he had done to Ezekiel—and all I had to do was nod.

His smile grew as I hesitated.

Zeb gaze on me was full of hatred. It was obvious: if we let him go, he would just continue to go after Maya, after Riddle and I. And especially after all that I had done to harm her… I needed to keep her safe.

I closed my eyes. “Yes.” I said quietly, as if it made it any less damming.

“A rational choice,” Riddle agreed. But I could feel his ecstasy in the air, the way his power crackled and dove.

It was cowardly of me, but I looked away as Riddle walked over to him. Tried not to hear the sick ripping of flesh as Riddle dug inside for that glowing orb of light.

Instead I look up at my child, hoisted myself up to reach for her. My back tugged as I extended my wings, uncomfortable with the new bones and muscle.

The skin of her cheek was soft and fragile, like a peach, and cool to the touch. *Forgive me,* I thought. I stroked her brow, stared down at the rise and fall of her chest as a familiar gulping noise floated up from the ground. In the moonlight, she looked already dead.

But when I touched her, when I focused on her and recalled, amazed, the depth and sincerity of my love for her, something incredible happened.

A prickle of my old power flared, a single candle flame, a deep drum beat in the empty cavern of my ribs. A thought, a suggestion, floated into my mind, like a petal on the breeze.

I acted on instinct, no space for a breath between thought and action. No sooner had it occurred to me then I had reached into myself and found the place I used to share with my siblings. It was cracked and dusty, barely visible, like a coin at the bottom of a well. But it was there.

Brothers, sisters, I tried, not really expecting an answer. *I have her, the peripeteia, she is here!*

“Harry,” Riddle called from below, “what are you doing?”

I glanced back down at him. He was splattered with blood, eyes once again alight with a saturation of energy. There was a mess next to him, one I didn’t dare look at.

Please, I thought.

Maya twitched under my hand.

Ouroboros

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I didn't dare drag my eyes away, even as Riddle called my name again, this time with a touch of impatience. I touched her face, her skin soft, cold, like paper beneath my fingertips.

"Maya?"

I don't know what I expected; maybe a small part of me had hoped for a response. But, of course, none came. She remained as she had been: still, voiceless, sleeping.

Movement of another kind flickered in the corner of my eye and, irritated, I glanced down, sure to see Riddle doing some other, equally horrendous act.

But Riddle was simply standing, leant back with an insouciant grace against the trunk of my tree. He wiped his mouth, his eyes an flared with an unnatural brightness.

What I had seen, in fact, was the pooling of moonlight in the centre of the room. It almost seemed like a hallucination of some sort, like a heat distortion above the dark stone floor of the greenhouse, air turning liquid.

Maya, I thought, and moved, my balance precarious on the mossy branches, to gather her in my bloody arms, shield her from whatever bizarre thing that was growing below. The light grew bright and sharp, like it came from the July sun, and not a full, gentle moon, and pressed its way into a slim silver line. With a playful sort of wiggle, the line split into two and pulled apart, like a bow, until there, hovering in the air before us, was a window into somewhere else entirely.

My mouth dropped open—I recognised that place, even if it was only an ectopic square of it. There was someone there too, leant close to the invisible border between their world and ours.

A familiar voice rang out, as clear and melodic as a bell. "Harry?"

Ele was just as I remembered them, burnt yellow eyes set deep into a youthful, feminine face, lips parted with the sweetest cupids bow. Behind them, past the impressive white glow of their wings, I glimpsed a familiar hall, the one we called the Balanced Hall. There was a sudden lump in my throat, and for a moment I wished for nothing more than to step through, to smell the clean, pure air of my home.

I don't quite know how I made it down so fast, especially as I had Maya clasped to my chest, right where Zeb had thrust his hand into me. But when I came back to myself I was only a step away, my heart thundering away in my chest like a frenetic drummer.

My own voice was hoarse and shook terribly. "How are you here?"

Ele looked as if they'd seen a ghost, and in some ways I suppose they had. "You called for me… but how? How did you call?"

"I don't know—but it doesn't matter," I shook my head, "brother, I thought I'd never see you again, I thought you were gone to me—"

"The peripeteia," Ele identified with quiet amazement. Their gaze flickered to the cross behind me, and then back to the precious cargo I carried. "You must give her to me, Harry."

I felt a little embarrassed at the flash of hurt, before I rationalised it to myself. They were fighting a war and here, in my arms, was the key to stopping it in itself. Of course that would be their focus, what had I expected? That they fall into me and weep?

"Yes," I agreed, and glanced at Riddle, who hadn't moved. He remained uncharacteristically quiet, watching. "You can—can take her from this place?"

Ele gave a short nod, a jerk of their head. "Here," they reached out their arms. "I cannot pass through, you must bring her to me."

I looked to Riddle again, nervous. Where was his reaction? Why would he give up the peripeteia so easily, after all that? Something wasn't right, but I certainly wasn't going to wait around for him to decide he wanted to stop this.

I stepped forward. She was so small, so soft pressed to my chest, that I almost didn't want to. I'd looked for her for so long… and now we'd been reunited for what—minutes, at best?

As unfair as it felt, I knew what I needed to do. Slowly, and with the upmost care, I placed her into Ele's waiting hold, gritting my teeth against the pain in my wounded shoulder as it jostled. She didn't belong in this place. She belonged back to the mortal world she had left, to live out a life free from the meddling of my kind.

Her weight shifted and then disappeared as Ele took her from me. They held her easily, as tall and broad as they were, and she looked even more fragile cradled in those great arms. Already colour was bleeding back into her face, her cheeks. In contrast, my arms prickled into uncomfortable goosebumps as they pushed into Heaven, and I was guilty to feel a little relieved as I stepped back.

And so she was gone. I was on one side, and she on the other.

"I see you haven't yet managed to free yourself of him yet."

For a moment I was confused, and then realised they must have caught my earlier glance. "Riddle?"

They nodded, beautiful face cold with disdain.

Now apparently deciding to join in the conversation, Riddle cleared his throat and smiled. He was still peeling with the blood he'd first appeared with, and I suddenly felt a little embarrassed as I imagined how it came across to Ele.

“Listen, brother,” I said, deciding to ignore the comment—there was an infinitely more important topic to discuss—namely why I was able to call them, and how I could help turn the tide, how I could leave this place. I braved the horrible iciness to clasp them on the shoulder. “Now that I am here—”

“Don’t touch me!” The shout took me by surprise. Their eyes flashed with some great and terrible fury that I had never seen directed my way before.

I shrank back, confused. “Brother?”

“I am not your brother, Harry,” Ele told me slowly. “You are an Other—no, you are worse than that for you were once beloved, and *still* you betrayed us.”

And *oh* how that felt curiously similar to the harpy’s claws in my belly. I’m sure my face drained of colour, sure they must have seen the hurt there, for they sneered then, emboldened.

“I want no touch from you, no words, no silver-tongued lies. You are Fallen and a disgrace, and I can only thank our Father that you at least had the decency to call me here to return that which you have stolen.”

“Ele,” I said, shocked, “I’ve Fallen, yes, but I’m no Other—”

“Look at your *wings* Harry,” they said, pained.

I remembered then, that angels could see through to them, even if they were hidden. Shame coiled thick and hot in my throat and I bowed by head for a moment, overcome by it. “I had to do many things to find her,” I said past the lump in my throat. “I tried, broth—Ele, I tried to redeem myself.”

They stared at me with their cats eyes, eyelashes a pale venus fly trap. “You are not redeemed. You are in Hell, Harry, because you have sinned irrevocably.”

“Yeah? What about the peripeteia?”

I probably would have flinched at the suddenness of Riddle’s voice next to my ear, but I was still curiously heavy with dread. He nudged his shoulder into mine—the uninjured one—and, although I knew it only worsened Ele’s thoughts of me, I was grateful for the reassurance, even if only brief.

“Technically she killed herself. Regardless of my influence,” he added at Ele’s look. “That was still the action she took, so why is she not an irrevocable sinner?”

Ele frowned, disapproving. “She is the peripeteia,” they said.

“And Harry is your brother,” Riddle replied tartly.

“He is nothing.”

The tiny, wounded noise I made as I sucked in a breath echoed embarrassingly in the damp, earthy air. Beside me, Riddle’s shoulders straightened imperceptibly. I think maybe he was a

little taken aback at the casual cruelty too.

“I am down here because I tried,” I said.

Ele scoffed and opened their mouth to deliver what I’m sure would have been yet another cutting blow.

A hand descended on their shoulder from behind, and their mouth snapped closed. The window, still flimsy and ephemeral around the edges, stretched like taffy and the Balanced Hall was revealed inch by inch: raised, gleaming wooden benches that sloped down to the plinth in the middle, the ring of stoic white statues. Another stood next to Ele, a newcomer whom I had once known well. Someone I had always respected and admired, and, off the back of Ele’s words, someone who’s eyes I was no longer able to meet.

Seraphim was the oldest, the holiest of us.

“Harry. We have been looking for you.” Her voice was gentle enough that in my surprise, I forgot my new resolution and glanced up.

“Sister,” I whispered.

Warm, calf-eyes stared back, the lines in her wise old face as familiar to me as my own hand. “We felt your loss keenly. I am glad to see you well.”

I blinked. I knew what I looked like: a ragged, thin creature, half-grown black wings and eyes hollowed with anger, still with the bruises and blood from my fight. I would not have called myself ‘well’ by any meaning of the word.

“Why have you come?” I asked.

“Because you called,” she said simply. Her eyes darted to the looming presence behind me. “I must admit though, I am concerned to see the company you have found.”

Riddle's hand slipped warm to rest on my lower back, silent and invisible to the two angels in front.

“He has helped,” I said, and then frowned. “In a way.”

“It has been a while, hasn’t it,” Riddle stared at Seraphim, expression impenetrable. “I’m almost surprised you recognise me.”

Seraphim, to my shock, as I had never seen her look anything but beautifully serene, suddenly bit her lip. “I would always recognise you, brother."

I’m quite sure that in that moment Ele and I wore identical expression of utter incomprehension.

"Brother," Ele blurted out.

Seraphim nodded.

Riddle snorted. “I haven’t heard that word from your lips for at least a millennia, Seri.”

My brain felt like a machine in which a crucial cog had broken down.

She frowned, concerned. “You did not tell him? He did not know?”

“It slipped my mind,” Riddle said. His thumb stroked my lower back, as if to gently check I was still breathing. I’m sure I wasn’t.

Seraphim turned to me. "Lucifer was once one of us," she said, and then I did stop breathing.

No. There was just no way that he could be—

"Lucifer?" My voice hung quiet and fragile in the air.

Riddle nails dug into my back. "Yes," he said quietly.

“I don’t understand," I said. You can’t be Lucifer. You were just a child, newly created when I met you.”

“Not newly created,” Riddle admitted. “Newly Fallen.”

“He was one of the first,” Seraphim confirmed. “Older than I, than you.”

I struggled as suddenly the last seven days, no, the last millennia, began to read very differently. No wonder he’d known how to seed my wings. No wonder he had taken over Hell so easily. Even all of our arguments—he’d known from experience what I’d talked about, and that was why his rebukes were so intelligent.

“Don’t look so betrayed,” Riddle said and let his hand on my back fall. “The only thing that’s changed is that I had a name you didn’t know. Save that expression for the ones who cast you out because you tried to save another.”

Seraphim’s frown grew deeper. “We did not cast him out. He allowed a life to be lost and thus lost his Divinity.”

Riddle rolled his eyes. “Oh please. It was an engineered situation if you ask me.”

“How dare you,” Ele cut in, fuming. I’d almost forgotten they were there.

“How could you keep such a secret?” I turned to Riddle. “For so long?”

He shrugged. “It would have changed things that I didn’t want to change.”

“Harry,” Seraphim spoke now. “This is just one more unfortunate example of his trickery. You are not supposed to be here, with him—come back to us now, come home.”

And there they were, the words that I’d longed to hear for seven days, the ones I would have done anything for. Next to her, Ele paled but remained silent. I could read it on their face though: they disagreed entirely.

“I will aid you if you wish to return. You will never have to see this place again.”

My eyes slipped behind them both, to the clean, orderly lines that made up the Balanced Hall. It was home—I had a thousand memories associated with it, a thousand other places in Heaven that I loved. Nothing had changed.

Except that wasn’t quiet true, was it? Nothing had changed but suddenly it all seemed so different.

It was me.

I had been the same for millennia, and in seven days I had become something new. Now, when I thought about the perfect, beautiful place of my Father, about how none suffered in the way so many did down here, I felt a new feeling. It was hot and uncomfortable, and although I shied away from the word, I must admit that it was remarkably similar to bitterness. Because for all of his lies, Riddle—Lucifer?—hadn’t necessarily been wrong when he’d spoken about Hell being a place for the undesirables, for anything that wasn’t perfect and good. And then I thought about how He had condemned me to be here, because I had tried to save one of them—one that he loved enough to merely cast out, to throw away instead of destroying completely.

I wonder if any of them read it in my face. Seraphim, I think she saw it. For a moment she looked sad.

“No,” I said. “I can’t go back.”

It was silent then, silence with a weight to it.

“You are certain?” she whispered.

“I am,” I said, even though I wasn’t. Was I acting out of pride? Anger? Was I making a colossal mistake? I had no energy left to think about it anymore.

“Then truly I am sorry,” she said.

A breeze picked up. It murmured through the air, a soft push of air past our faces, strong enough that Riddle’s hair whipped around his head. He looked nervous, for some reason. Maybe at my declaration.

“Riddle” I said, “I—”

And then the world fell away.

*

Blackness. I was submerged in blackness, except it was inside my head. It was so dark, so impenetrable and chilling that I screamed and then it cracked, a great shudder of pain and light and confusion.

Something was opening, it felt like my head was pulled in two and some terrible entity forced inside, and then—

Then I remembered.

*

Seven days ago

I knew this scene.

The rooftop. My child, dead on the ground far below, my body writhing on the concrete in pain as the sun burnt down.

I watched as, for the second time, what remained of Ezekiel fluttered into the wind like autumn leaves. He was no more, and again I heard my siblings cry out as they felt the loss.

There was a slow tapping noise. Footsteps.

Why was this happening? Why was I forced to watch this terrible moment again? Was it God —was He punishing me?

I remembered this. Riddle, walking over to me… and right on cue, familiar feet filled my vision. A hot flick of blood dripped onto my cheek. I remembered that too.

“My dear Harry," Riddle said, voice rich with the power he’d just consumed.

I felt my wings begin to fall apart as I died. I opened my mouth. I had no control over it, as the words fell out, helpless to watch as the scene replayed.

“Let me pass in peace," I said.

“Oh no," I heard him laugh. "You don't get to do that now.”

And this was when I died, wasn’t it, when I Fell? I didn’t understand. Why was I back here? My vision faded, flickered dark-light-dark, like the shadow of a fire.

A hand descended on my brow, still hot with my brother’s dying Divinity. “Don’t fall asleep on me,” he murmured.

That was… new. It hadn't happened before, the last thing I remembered was that sentence—*you don't get to do that now.*

Power poured into me through Riddle's skin, like poison. It ran through every vein, every cell, slipped into the chambers of my heart. It found the killing-light Ezekiel had thrown at me and *took*. Sucked it straight up, back into his fingers where the rest of it coiled. Even through my panic, I still didn't understand how he could do this—how he wasn't burnt alive by it.

He propped me up, now that I wasn't dying. Trailed his fingers through my wings, watched curiously as they came away full of white ash. The best of me, the purest part, fluttered in the breeze like petals in spring.

"Beautiful because it blooms," he said, "singular because it falls."

"Leave me," I choked at him. Scrabbled to push him off but I had nothing left. No strength, no energy, no emotion but horror.

"Oh no, no," he shushed me, his breath in my hair as he rocked me. He smelt like smoke, like blood and death. "Harry, don't you see? You saved me." The smile was audible in his voice. "You *ruined yourself* for me."

I couldn't help but sob. I didn't care about that. "You killed him."

"He doesn't mean anything, darling." The single world had a foreboding echo.

With each blink I felt stronger. I tried to clutch at my wings, to press them into my back, but they fell through my hands like sand. I wept.

"I'll get them back for you," Riddle said, stroked my arms. He held me like I was precious, like I was made of glass. "I promise you, you'll fly again."

I pushed him away again, futilely. He resisted easily, nosed at my neck, breathed me in. What had I done to make him like this? I didn't understand.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because I love you," Riddle said simply.

My breath caught in shock, my body rigid pressed to him.

He went on, the words low and measured. "I didn't want this—this *existence.* I was going to let him kill me. And then, of course, it was you. It's alway you." He seemed to be almost talking to himself. "I was going to forget you, you know. I know it was never personal for you—it's just," his voice almost cracked it was so raw, "just how you are. And then you—"

I shook my head but he didn't seem to notice, too busy clutching at me.

"—you almost died, Harry," his arms came up around me, pressing me to him. His beautiful, ink-stained wings drew around us like night pulling across the sky. "*For me*."

Then how could he say it wasn't personal? "I let you stab me in the heart as I burned," I said, disbelieving. "I *cut out a piece of myself* for you."

Riddle laughed again. "Yes but I know you, you want to save everyone."

My throat closed as that horrible noise resounded in my head. That last, fleeting *thump* of her heart. I'd saved no one, it would seem. Not even myself.

Riddle went quiet. He was breathing me in, deep, equal breaths. I didn't know what he thought. What he planned to do. We just sat there, my weight leant against him, on a school roof as the sun beat down through the shelter of his wings.

What should I do? My siblings would be coming… in fact, why they weren't already here? Was it Riddle?

It felt like hours had passed, like I was already in Hell, before he next spoke. He kept his face buried in my neck. "I will make you a deal," he said quietly.

"I don't want your deal." I was too tired to summon much anger now.

"I will give you back your child," the silk pull of his words echoed in the shell of my ear.

I stiffened. Twisted, despite the pain that roared to life in my back, the next wave of dust that was carried away by the wind. We ended up face to face. I stared into his eyes, at the clump of his wet eyelashes, his beauty even like this. Searched for anything but the resignation I saw.

His words sunk into me. I shook my head, mouth full of poison. "How can you be so *cruel*?"

He seemed genuinely surprised. "Cruel?"

"To—to tell me these things, after what you've done."

His burnt black hands cupped my cheeks, his expression as serious as I'd ever seen it. "No, no, it's no joke. I swear to you, I will give her back to you."

I searched his face, the pain in it, the desperation. I didn't want him. I didn't want anything but the honey he offered to me. It would be a trap, I knew it. But I would taste it anyway.

"What is your deal?" I said, exhausted.

He went quiet for a moment, in thought. "You will spend five days in Hell, with me. If, by the end of that time, you still wish to return to the mortal world, I will let both you and the peripeteia go freely. I swear it," he added at my look of disbelief. "But if you choose to stay… then both of you belong to me."

I felt his power swell. He wasn't used to controlling it, and I could taste it, his giddiness at the idea. A pang of doubt ran through me. He didn't love me, that I was sure of. I didn't think a being like him was capable of it. But fixation? Obsession? Yes. That he was quite capable of.

This seemed too easy. I could see no way in which I would not win. And I knew how these deals worked. “What is your catch?”

He nodded, had expected my question. “You will forget this conversation.”

I drew back. “And that is all?”

“Yes. I will let Hell take you. And then I will come and find you—and the five days will begin.”

Hope. That monstrous, dangerous emotion burnt through me like dry kindling. As much as I didn’t trust him—of course I didn’t, the one who had just killed my brother—a demon must obey the law of their deal. Anticipation buzzed in the air around us. I breathed it in, felt it rise like a dizziness in me.

My child... I could save her. I could use his naivety, his obsession. It would damn me… but then I was already damned.

I spoke before I had truly thought, even though my voice sounded like a ghost’s. “Then I agree to your deal.”

Satisfaction shuttered over his face. For a beat, it wasn’t human, the way he looked at me. Like a panther, animal-like as it watched its prey. And then he smiled, a slow, steady smile. Leant an inch closer, brushed the tip of his nose against mine. I felt his breath on my lips, couldn’t move because of it.

“Then it is done,” he whispered.

The chains of the deal wrapped themselves around me. I could almost hear the *clang* as the lock was shuttered.

“And now?’ I asked. My heart thundered wildly in my ribs. It was harder than I thought to push away that instinct of mine, the one that screamed out at me to *run, to let myself die*—that told me I had played right into his hands.

He stared at me, and his smile tinged with resignation, an oily film of annoyance.

“Now I have to let you Fall.”

*

Pain. My back a strip of fire, my ribs burnt to black coal. I surfaced, for moments, felt arm around me, rocking back and forth, a familiar scent.

“I’m sorry, darling, that I took so long,” Riddle murmured into my hair, “but I’ve found you, like I promised I would. Won’t you open your eyes for me? Come on, Harry. You want to

show me, don't you, want to prove me wrong? Harry… Harry please, *please* open your eyes for me."

*

Nobody looked much surprised when I gasped back into myself. Well, actually, Ele looked appalled, but that had been their permanent expression for a while now.

"...did know?" Riddle was saying quietly to Seraphim, who looked displeased. "I wasn't sure."

My eyes narrowed, anger a sudden, spitting beast. I whirled around to him, shoved myself right up into his face. "You," I spat, disgusted, "you made a *deal* with me?"

He had the gall to shrug, face placid. "You accepted it."

A crack ran through me, every sense in sharp relief: the mercury glitter of his eyes, the stamped black shadows of the trees around us, Seraphim's wings flared like an eagle behind her, the dripping cross in the corner. I had chosen to stay and oh what a *fool* I was! Why had I played right into his hands like that?

"And now what? I stay here for you to play with when you get bored ripping people apart?" I hated that he could see me tremble, hated the way he remained so calm.

"You and the girl are mine," he said slowly. And as invasive as it felt, as much as it made me bristle, he spoke the truth. I could feel it wriggle into place inside me, tighten down.

The angels were silent. Probably as distraught as I was; I had given them salvation and then ripped it away.

My eyes burned but I refused to cry. "How could you deceive me like that? This entire time, when I've been stumbling around like a fool—"

"Well I did have a plan," he said with the slightest undercurrent of annoyance, "but we all know that you're not one sit quietly and let things happen as they're supposed to."

"Oh and how sorry I am that I didn't just let you imprison me in your bedroom," I said scathingly. "Really, that must have been such an inconvenience."

His jaw tightened. "I was trying to keep you safe."

I laughed, bitterly. "The only thing I need to be kept safe from is *you*."

Even though it was minute, the barest flinch, it still made me feel sickly satisfied. Let him hurt as I hurt, I thought.

His voice went icy. “Have you already forgotten what I told you? I love you, Harry. Everything I have done, I've done for *you*.”

I searched for something to say. Only cruelty was left, and my face burned with it. “What you feel isn’t love, it’s the same thing a child feels about his toy when someone tries to take it—”

The air went silent, any sound sucked into a vacuum until the only thing left was my heartbeat and the *click* as my ears popped,

I stared at him as fear crept through me. I was just angry enough that I could shove it away, ignore the way the hair on my arms stood on end, the way Seraphim looked as if she wanted to reach out into Hell to take me.

I squared my jaw, forced my words out. “You don’t love me. You want to own me.”

His eyes flashed down at me. “Remember our deal? *I already do*.”

Something hot squirmed in my belly, anger, and then abruptly when cold. His brow furrowed as I went still with the realisation, and glanced at Maya with horror, still curled up small in Ele’s arms. *Oh*, I realised with a sinking feel. Oh *no.* I stepped closer to him then, took his arm. My heart beat was so fast I felt sick. “Riddle,” I said desperately, “not her.”

He raised an eyebrow. “She’s the peripeteia, Harry.”

I shook my head. “She’s a *child*. She needs to be in the mortal world, she needs to be safe.”

Riddle snorted. “What exactly do you think I’m going to do to her? She was fine sleeping here.”

“Please,” I said lowly. His eyes widened a fraction at the word. I don’t think either of us had really expected me to beg, but I’d throw away my pride, throw away it all if it mean I could give her back what I’d taken. “Have me, I don’t care, but her—

“Harry.” Seraphim’s voice ran clear, like water, cutting straight through the intense atmosphere Riddle and I had forced around us. “Your child will be safe with me, do not worry.”

I let go of Riddle’s arm, confused. “What?”

“You do not need to worry about Maya.”

“I made a deal,” I said slowly, humiliated. I didn’t want her to know, didn’t want anyone to know that I had stooped so low.

“I know of your deal.” Seraphim seemed saddened. “And it matters not. She will be safe.”

“But,” I swallowed the dryness in my throat. “The terms included her too.”

Seraphim sighed. I could barely believe it, so out of character was the action. “No, little brother. They did not.”

I saw the change come over Riddle first. A gradual stiffening of his spine, his chest stilling for a fraction of a second as he stopped breathing. I didn’t understand. What was I missing?

“Oh fuck,” Riddle mumbled. He sounded grave, and surprised, but also delighted in a way I couldn’t make sense of.

“Sister?” I asked, still looking between them.

Seraphim's eyes, her beautiful brown eyes, were made ugly with pity. "I am sorry Harry," she said gently.

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

Riddle's black fingers were over his mouth but even through the bars of his fingers I could see his grin, spilling out of him.

“Maya is not the peripeteia,” Seraphim said gently.

Around us, the trees waved their branches, and a few pink petals floated down to the floor like snow, before they sank into the blood. There was a ringing in my ears, the kind that usually comes just before one passes out. But I didn’t have the luxury of that escape.

The laugh escaped me, a thin, bitter, incredulous thing. “What?” I shook my head. “That... it's not possible.”

“She can’t lie.” It was Riddle, the quiet voice that spoke up. “You know she can’t.” And I did: angels were not born with the capacity for deceit, not unless we had taken a mortal form.

Seraphim's hesitation had the hair on my arms raising, my stomach going cold. "Seraphim?" I asked again, terrified when she said nothing. "Then who?”

My sister opened her mouth, wordless for a moment. And then she said only three words, three, quick bullets.

“It is you.”

Chapter End Notes

surprise! one more chapter to go (and then an epilogue!) :D

Seraphim - a seraph (“burning one”) is a type of celestial or heavenly being originating in Ancient Judaism. The term plays a role in subsequent Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Tradition places seraphim in the highest rank in Christian angelology.

Fallen

I think I've often conflated shock and surprise in the past. Surprise is feeling like the rug has been swept out from under you, like your brain has to race to keep up, your muscles tightening in preparation to flee or fight.

Shock, on the other hand, is numbness. It's being stuck, frozen in time, unable to think, or move, or do anything other than listen to words echo in your head and try, desperately, to attach them to some kind of meaning.

It was the latter that I felt, drowning in the silence of my heart stopping. I didn't know what to say, my tongue lifeless, thick in my mouth.

Seraphim bowed her head slightly. "I am sorry to have kept this from you."

It still didn't make any sense. I swallowed, forced my lips to move. "I'm a Fallen," I managed to croak. "How could I possibly be the peripeteia if I have *Fallen*?"

"I can understand your confusion—"

But my mind was already spinning, jumping ahead, caught in the hurricane. "Years," the word was a punch, "I spent years watching her, I helped her grow, I fought for her, I Fell for her."

"And it was admirable," Seraphim's voice was soft and full of love, "necessary."

Something else occurred to me, something so terrible that I almost didn't want to think it. "And," I kept on, slowly grinding out that bloody, smiling chain of logic, "if I were the peripeteia... then what about the choice?"

The choice that was supposed to damn either Heaven or Hell, to put an end to this centuries old, bloody war of ours?

Seraphim's face softened with sympathy. "You chose to stay." Her gaze flicked to the demon beside me. "Here, with him."

I stared at her "But I didn't know. How could I have known that was..." My voice was so raw I had to stop, to swallow back the lump in my throat before I screamed.

Somehow, she smiled. "You couldn't. But that was always the point."

My fingernails bit into the flesh of my palm as I fisted my hands, four crescents of grounding pain. "Have I condemned you?"

She said nothing for a moment. "That depends, brother, on what you wish to happen now."

It was cruel then, that it was at that moment the air around my siblings shimmered. We all knew it at once, no need, no point to questioning: with the finality of those words her part had

finally been played, the curtains ready to close.

“Wait,” I said, terrified, “you can’t leave now!” I had half a mind to throw myself through… but I had no idea what would happen, both how I would react to Heaven, and what Riddle would do.

“It is done,” Seraphim said. “And we must go. We are not supposed to be here.”

“Sister,” I reached out my hand in some aborted gesture, but it was happening too quickly for me to do anything. Already Ele and Maya were no longer visible to us. My throat twisted. “I’m sorry.”

Seraphim smiled. “You were the only one of us that could possibly have had the curiosity to love him back.”

And, just like that—so quickly I had whiplash, blinked, convinced it was a cruel trick of the light—they were gone.

Riddle and I stood there, alone, in the midst of the twisted jungle of trees, two mutilated sets of black wings and a bloody, moonlit floor. He stared at me. Shook his head slightly as if in wonder.

I breathed out and tried to hold the shaky shards of myself together. My fingertips, lips, feet had all gone numb, and I felt sick and sweaty, like I was seconds away from crumpling. All I could think of was that last image of Seraphim’s face: pale, solemn, sad. And that I’d never see her again—never see Ele, who despised me, never see Maya… I was trapped down here. And I had no idea what to do, what being the peripeteia meant, if it was already too late, if my siblings lay broken and shredded on the battlefields, *all because of me*—

A hand landed on my chest, fingers splayed. “Do remember to breathe,” Riddle told me.

It was characteristic of him—dry and blunt. But somehow the familiarity of it unlocked the panic, and my lungs finally inflated, oxygen rushing back into my veins as I panted. Riddle snorted. I raised my head just enough to glare at him, annoyed when he only looked more amused.

I took a few slow breaths, and tried to pull myself together. I couldn’t afford to be so off-balance, not right now and not with him… but there was just so much to *feel*. Rage, that he’d had the gall to strike such a deal, a deal that had led to this mess; grief at losing Maya again; bitter shock at Seraphim’s revelation; a whole tangled ball of confusion at what he’d told me in my missing memories. All that high intensity emotion had left me drained. Not to mention the state I was in: my shoulder still eked out a steady trickle of blood, and my arms and face were smeared with ash from the fire I’d made.

But what other choice did I have but to keep going?

I straightened up. The greenhouse around us felt tense and watchful. At some point the moon had been swallowed up by the clouds and the shadows seemed stronger now, the air colder and sweeter. I wondered what the guests were all doing, if they were still in that strange, pristine ballroom.

“So,” I said, like a pebble tossed into water. Ripples of silence nudged around us.

Riddle slunk closer in the darkness like a serpent. “So.” He sounded thoughtful. “Harry the peripeteia.”

“Don’t call me that,” I said sharply.

“Why not? It’s what you are, isn’t it?” He stood over me, tall and looming. His slender neck was mottled with a ring of black bruises, blood eking out of one nostril.

“So shall I call you Lucifer?”

He gave no discernible reaction, but something in me, the oldest part, shrank back all the same. “No,” he murmured. “You won’t call me that.”

“And why is that?”

“I don’t want the name he gave me.”

I stared at him pointedly. “Neither do I.”

Slowly, the blankness to his face cracked a little, his eyes warming. I realised something that I didn’t quite know how to feel about: that odd glimmer that I found in his gaze sometimes, the one that I hadn’t been able to put my finger on… that was *fondness*, wasn’t it?

He sighed, still staring at me. “Full of surprises, aren’t you?"

I rubbed at my eyes and suddenly felt bone-weary. “What now?”

“Could try winning the war.”

I opened them again and laughed. “No. I’m not winning any war." I took a breath, let it rush out from me as slowly as I could. The words unspooled from me as easily as the decision did. "I’m done with this. I don’t want to be another pawn. You can all do what you want, I wash my hands of it.”

Riddle's smile faded.

"And you," I stared at him, gratified when he seemed to look vaguely alarmed. "You lied to me."

"I never lied," he said carefully. "I omitted. It's different."

"You thought me a fool."

His voice went soft. "You're not a fool, Harry. You were desperate."

"I was," I agreed, "and you took advantage. You let me forget." I tried to let the anger inside me go, tried to breathe it away in the words. "It was a trap."

Riddle took a step towards me. "What do you want me to say, Harry? Would you have listened to me?" He snorted. "No, of course you wouldn't have. You hated me."

Hated. Such an easy word in past-tense, wasn't it? I wonder if he knew a part of me still did.

"You could have told me," I told him. "That you were a brother—"

Riddle looked disgusted. “I'm not your brother.”

"—that you were an angel, that you were *Lucifer*."

He wrinkled his nose at the word. "Listen," he stressed, shaking his head. "You have to understand... I couldn't trust *anyone*. Not even you. If they knew, down here, if they had any proof at all, I would have been slaughtered. And I was weak back then, remember?”

Yes, I remembered that little boy. The way he’d gripped my arm when that beast had leaped at him, shining silver eyes filled with quiet dread. “I thought you wanted to be killed.” The words tasted sour on my tongue.

“I did.”

I opened my mouth. Shut it again, cross. *“Why?”*

His sigh was long and weary, the sigh of someone long come to terms with their grief. “He cast me out, Harry, my own father. Away from my family, away from my home, and into *this place*, where I was weak and horrified and—alone.”

His voice sounded odd on the last word, as much as he tried to hide it.

“And it wasn’t right,” I told him, despite the way the back of my neck prickled. "I'm sorry for it. But... I thought Zeb...?"

Riddle looked like he wanted to laugh. “Zeb's father had been around too long not to suspect, even if he had no confirmation. He was waiting for me to reveal it, so he kept me close." His smile turned bitter.

"Was he the master of the Hellhound? The one that tried to kill you?" As I said the words, my memory threw the name I'd heard back at me, accompanied with the image of a strange, thin man atop a slobbering beast. "Dantalion?"

"No," Riddle seemed amused. "He was our tutor. That was something else entirely.”

I stared at him until he relented.

"I provoked him into it. I was going to let it happen, and then you... well."

I felt the frown settle on my face. "You provoked it. On purpose."

Riddle snorted. "What can I say? Teenage angst."

A wave of fierceness rose up in me and I scowled at him. “You’re an idiot."

“I wasn’t the one who sliced away at their soul for a demon,” he pointed out.

“Weren't you?” It hurt but I spread my wings, let him see the black feathers, small but gleaming.

His face turned possessive. “Touché.”

We were both quiet then. I felt awkward—there was so much to say. But I didn’t know how to raise it, or if I even *wanted* to raise it.

“You should have told me,” I said after a pause, softer this time, for the way it made his eyes go warm. “Who you were. I would have tried to help.”

He smiled then, a real smile, small and sad, and reached out to brush his thumb across the roundness of my cheek. “You would have been disgusted.”

My spine shivered. “No," I said, "I wouldn't have been. I don't think you realise, you've always been..." Why did I flush at this? I tried to will it away; what a pointless mortal hangover.

“Been what?” Riddle prompted.

I had to break his gaze then, look into the darkness of the trees instead. “Important," I settled on. "You've always been important to me, and—" the words kept going, slipping through my lips— "it doesn't make any sense because you're not *good*, you've done terrible, awful things, and you've hurt people, and I should by all means hate you for it. And yet..."

He waited, face blank like he was doing it on purpose (he was), and I shrugged, helpless and angry. "I can't."

His fingers, long and black and spindly, pressed under my chin to turn my head until I had no choice but to meet his gaze. And there it was again—the fondness. “And so, if you don't hate me, what *do* you feel?”

It felt like I was walking along a tightrope, and each time I spoke I lifted my foot, unsure if when I placed it down again it would take my weight. “I don’t know."

The corners of his mouth turned up. “Yes,” he murmured, “you do.”

I didn’t want to say it. Because it would change things and I wasn’t an idiot, I knew exactly in what way. There was a monster on my doorstep and it had been there for a thousand years, and now... now I was about to *invite it inside*—

“Do you want me to help you?”

Ah but he was *good*, knew exactly how to prod at me. I closed my eyes. Thought, for the first time in my life, about lying, about how that would feel, the burn of it on my tongue.

"I feel...″ My mouth closed, wordless for a heartbeat, and another, and then, "like you've—" the world around me seemed to hold its breath—"like you've *ruined* me."

I registered the pressure first, at my jaw, as his fingers dug in, and then his arm was around my waist, pressing us together so tightly that I could smell the blood on him, the burnt electricity of Divinity. He *liked* that.

"And have I?"

I looked at him then, searched his gaze. "Yes," I said quietly. "Of course you have."

What had I done to myself that I wanted him like this, that I burned for it? I shook, as I pressed my mouth to his. My breath, my knees, the whole of me trembled, exhausted and in pain and overcome. Time slowed down. Everything narrowed to the point where his lips were soft under mine, the sound he made in the back of his throat, the heat of him against me. It was so *warm,* this feeling in my body, and my chest ached somehow, some phantom pain that I didn't quite understand.

He drew back, looked at me in wonder. I don't know what expression he saw but his hand found the back of my head and he inched closer again, bumped our noses together.

"Harry," he murmured into my lips, and then kissed me, again, and again, until I melted under it, until his mouth *finally* opened up, hot and wet, and I licked inside.

He was always so hungry. And now I was too, felt drunk, addicted—but it was deeper than how it had been at the bonfire, a strange dark feeling that went straight down into my bones, that made me want to grip on to him, drag my nails through him until he carried my mark, my wounds.

A familiar coldness slipped around us at the same time as I felt his power brush static across my skin.

I broke away, dizzy. "Wait."

"Wait?" He nipped my bottom lip, pulled me in.

It was remarkably distracting. I got caught up in it for another few seconds before I managed to push him away again. "*Riddle.*"

"*Harry,*" he said into my mouth.

I was too late anyway: the blackness swallowed us up and we were swept along, still with his hands all over me. Something was different now though. I don't know how, or why, but I could sense the movement of his shadows, the way they stretched molecule-thin across great distances as they ferried us along. It was instinctual, like breathing, to reach down and tug on one and we stopped, suspended in the darkness.

Riddle drew back, alert, and I smirked at him before I let them slip through my grasp.

The next thing I knew he was beneath me on a familiar wide bed. On the shelves, a few odd metallic trinkets stirred with a sleepy twitch at our arrival and a venus flytrap yawned.

“So that’s new,” Riddle said beneath me. I looked down to find myself straddling his waist, the demon staring up at me, intrigued.

“Uh—” I said eloquently, and tried to move, but his hands found my hips and tugged me steady.

“No, don’t,” he grinned. “Looks like you are the peripeteia after all. How did you know how to do that?”

I cleared my throat, hyperaware of the warm shift of muscle beneath me, how his torso looked stretched out against the dark sheets. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t think you realise how hard it is to go against me right now. I’m fresh with Divinity.” He cocked his head. “Try to keep me here.”

The next second he surged up, abs flexing as he sought to pull me under him.

No, I thought, and pushed him down. There was a slam of air as he hit the bed, hard.

“Oh,” I said, panicking. “Um, sorry, I—”

But he simply laughed, his teeth sharp. “I like it. Feels more like before, doesn’t it?”

I frowned at him. “I was stronger.”

“Not sure about that,” he said with a raised eyebrow.

“I was,” I protested.

“Maybe for the first few thousand years whilst I got my bearings,” he said, begrudgingly.

“If you were stronger it was because of me,” I said and reached down to press my palm against his neck. Barely any pressure but his eyes still turned dark, smile fading. It was dangerous, what I was doing. But I’d never felt something so thrilling.

“Careful there, little Fallen,” he murmured.

I bent my head, not entirely sure why, and kissed the soft skin under his jaw. “You’re Fallen too.”

I’d managed to distract myself enough not to notice his hands finding the side of my hips and tugging. We ended up chest to chest, with him sat up against the headboard and my hands on his shoulders. His height gave him the few inches he needed to peer down at me.

For a moment we said nothing, just stared at each other. I noticed, for the first time, the row of silver studs in his ears, the way they matched his irises.

“Seraphim said you loved me,” he said, apropos of nothing.

I looked down, didn’t realise I had gripped his skin tighter, left smears of black and red on the curve of his collarbone.

“Do you?” he whispered.

Somehow it was easier like this. In his room, away from the blood of before, the thin, icy air of the greenhouse and the night sky. The windows here showed a gentle twilight haze, the light washing in pale and golden, and it felt like we were once again sequestered away outside of time.

My words were quiet. “Seraphim doesn’t lie.”

He inhaled, eyes flickering across mine. “Harry.”

Of course he wasn’t satisfied with that. I took a steadying breath of my own. “Yes,” I told him, “I love you.”

I felt it in the air then. His power pouring it forward in a snap: glee, triumph, something dark too, like possession. It stole the breath from me, had my eyes widening.

He shook his head slightly, wordless, and then when he took hold of me again it was gentle. He knocked our foreheads together, shifted me even closer with his bent legs.

“I’ll never let you go now,” he said to me. “You realise that? You’re mine now.”

His breath was on my mouth and then his lips brushed over my cheek, my jaw, the column of my throat, with such softness that I suddenly felt oddly teary.

I clutched at him harder, even though it put enough pressure on my poor abused shoulder that I had to wince. “You’re mine too then,” I said.

He closed his eyes when he laughed, and his fingertips crept like a spider along my upper arm until they found the part of me Zeb had ripped open. There was a strange warmth and then the pain was gone. “Of course.”

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

His eyes went black and voided, the whites disappearing. “I can think of a few things,” he said softly.

My face rushed with heat. I hadn't even realised the innuendo. “I-“ I stuttered, fingers tightening on his shoulders. “You really think *now* is—“

I cut off as I realised the shaking of his shoulders was, in fact, laughter.

”Sorry,” he said, covering his smile with a palm. “It’s just—you can be very cute sometimes.”

I stared at him, horrified.

His smile just stretched wider until he shook his head and wrapped his fingers around my hips. “No, you’re right. We should bathe at least. You’re covered in blood.”

I gave him a dubious look. Yes I needed to bathe, but… “You’re not going to drop me in there again, are you?”

“What do you take me for?”

What, indeed. Despite how calm it sounded, there was an odd tension between us now. It felt like free fall, like suddenly we’d burst out into this strange, unfamiliar place where anything was possible.

The sound of water rang out and in my peripheral vision I saw the huge claw-footed tub begin to steam in the corner. Already I could smell lavender, and it made me think of last time, how he’d washed me so carefully even when I’d been frozen and resistant and teary. It suddenly put a lot of things into perspective—or at least explained his reaction when I’d told him I wanted to die… and then he’d all but fed me to a harpy.

I should probably be angrier about that. But in light of everything, it seemed so far away. It felt like that Harry was a lifetime ago, a different person. I wondered if it was all the darkness in me now, if that was why suddenly things that had seemed so abhorrent now were just hard lessons.

“Come on,” he said, and got to his feet. He stumbled a little and I was there in a heartbeat, steadying him.

“Are you ok?” I hadn’t really thought about what Zeb had done. In my mind he was invincible Riddle… but maybe he’d been hit harder than I thought.

He pressed a kiss to my bare shoulder, and gave me a small smile. “Yeah,” he said, and linked his hands with mine, led me over to the tub, gait smooth enough that my eyes narrowed.

The bath was indeed large enough for the both of us, but I hadn’t really thought about the fact that we’d be in there together. I stared down at my trousers, and then looked up to see Riddle already naked, unabashed, sinking into the water with a sigh. He was beautiful: strong lines, gleaming wet, the blood slipping free to reveal smooth, unmarked skin. A splash sounded as he ducked his head and then resurfaced, black hair like ink, swept back from his forehead.

“Come on darling. I’ve seen it all before, remember.”

A grimace found its way to my face as I slipped out of my own trousers. “Yes, you and a good chunk of the mortals. They still have that in L’accademia, you know.”

“Whatever do you mean? That was David, not you.” His eyes roved up and down my body, and I felt hot, my stomach flittery as I stepped in on the other end of the tub.

“Sure,” I said, to cover my embarrassment.

“Come over here.” He tugged me towards him.

I slipped on the porcelain, and ended up curled on top of him, my back to his chest, his broad hand splayed protectively over my belly. His heartbeat thumped beneath me, steady but quick. He ran his hands over my arms, carefully traced my shoulder, my bruised jaw, the edge of my ear, until I trembled against him. I found his hand, back to a normal, human hand, aside from the faint grey at the tips, and laced his fingers with mine, stroked my thumb against the inside of his palm until he curled it around me.

For a while we just lay there, pressed together. I felt safe, like this. Ironically free, even though his legs and arms bracketed me. I watched the water drip down his calves, the way the hair there had sluiced into curves, the fine bones of his ankle. The weird feeling rose up again, that odd hunger. I don’t know if it was love… it felt different from the love I’d had before, for my siblings, for the mortals. This was hotter, pricklier. Darker.

I’d meant what I said. He was mine now, too.

I don’t know how much time had passed, enough for my muscles to have relaxed, for my eyes to be half-lidded as I dozed on top of him, his touch lighting sparks against my skin, when he spoke.

“You said earlier,” he said, and I felt the way his chest vibrated, deep with his voice, “that you were done with it. The war, I mean.” Goosebumps rose under the trail of his fingertips over my stomach.

“Yeah,” I said, sleepily. “I’m not getting involved. Hell and Heaven can do what they like—*you* can do what you like—but I’ve had enough.” I tickled the water slowly with my fingers to hear the noise, enjoying the way the light shifted. “I’ve been a soldier my whole existence, shackled to my cause, dying again and again with nothing changing.” I sighed, frustrated. “I just want….”

“A break,” Riddle said quietly.

“A *life*,” I agreed. “My own, to do what I want with it.”

He hummed. “Well if it’s any consolation, things find their balance. I don’t think one person is enough to turn the tide.”

“Do you know what peripeteia means,” I said, doubtfully.

“Turning point.”

“Exactly. It was supposed to decide everything, once and for all.”

“Well,” he said after a moment, “maybe not.”

I shifted, turned to lie on my belly and prop my head up to stare at him. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe it’s just *your* turning point.”

I snorted. “I don’t think it’s that poetic.”

He sighed. “Maybe. In any case, I don’t think a holiday is a bad idea.”

“You mean—”

“I’ve pretty much united Hell at this point,” he said, smoothed his palm down my torso. He was still buzzing with happiness—I wonder if he knew I could sense it. “I can afford to take a few decades off.”

“Yeah?” I said doubtfully.

He turned to look at me. All beautiful and all mine. “My wings are ruined,” he said honestly. “It’s going to take at least a few years for them to recover, so it’s probably best I stay out of the public eye for a bit. And anyway, at least now I have the peripeteia to protect me.”

I wrinkled my nose.

“Nobody will dare to go near me,” he said dreamily, “what with my big strong, guardian an —”

My wet hand slopped over his mouth thankfully was enough to cut him off. “Riddle.” I could see my own chest turn red.

He laughed beneath my fingers, nipped at them until I drew back. The light from the windows washed him golden and warm, and the moment hung again, both of us staring. He lifted a wet hand of his own, brushed my hair out of my eyes, so tenderly.

“Does it hurt?” I asked him, uncomfortable.

“Hm?”

“Your wing.”

He shrugged. Lifted me off his chest to deposit me on the side of the bath, and then knelt in the water. His mouth went tight as his wings stretched out, their width still so impressive. My eyes were drawn immediately to the injured one, and I had to swallow the horror.

The whole fabric of the middle section was burnt away. Feathers had melted into the cartilage around a fist sized hole that I could see through. It must have been agony—there was no way he could fly again, not until it had healed.

“I’m sorry,” I said impotently. Unfamiliar rage filled me when I thought about Zeb, replaced quickly by an uneasy satisfaction at what we had done to him.

“It’ll heal.” He looked annoyed for a moment. “I can feel it healing now, actually. Itches like crazy.” He twisted, but couldn’t reach it, and gave up, gripped the side of the bath instead. “Only a few years.”

“I can try to heal it,” I offered, leaning in.

“That’s kind but you won’t be able to,” he sighed. “First feather’s gone, remember.”

I peered closer into the mess of the wound, and my heart twisted. “Thank you for doing that.”

He had his back to me now. I couldn’t see his face but I felt him sigh. “I told you I would.”

It took him a few seconds to realise that I’d gone quiet, unmoving.

He turned, confused. “Harry? What is it?”

I stared at what I’d found, unable to quite articulate it. It should have been impossible.

“Harry?”

I looked back up, met his gaze. I knew the shock was written into my face from the way he suddenly looked alarmed.

“Look,” I whispered, awed, and pointed to the part he’d be able to see.

There, amidst the black, was the stub of a single white feather.

Epilogue: Riddle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The boy—man—in front of him looks so unbearably content that Lucifer wants to rip him apart.

It's the kind of feeling that would have had him guilty and on his knees in his Father's church not too long ago. Now he just gives into it. Feels his teeth go sharp and hot in his mouth as he stares at the scene.

It's cruel, Lucifer thinks. These people are on their knees, dying—and for what? All so a being like him can watch and smile as he works his magic and finally brings them the rain they desire.

"Why are you *laughing*?" He's so swept up in his appalled anger that he doesn't realise the words have left his mouth until the angel turns.

His green eyes—pretty eyes, Lucifer will concede—turn wary as they drag over him. Lucifer fights the urge to clutch at his back, the terrible empty space that aches there.

"Tell me, angel," he says instead, forging ahead, "why do you laugh?"

The angel stares at him, impassive. "I laugh for their happiness," he replies, and Riddle wants to make him *hurt* for it.

He takes his anger out on the body lying slumped next to him, gives it a kick. "Why do you care for it? Why do you bother with this? They don't understand—they never will."

Of course they won't. Because He hasn't deigned to give them the knowledge yet. Poor, sacrificial *sheep.*

The angel has the gall to look confused, before something determined falls into the set of his mouth. "Beauty does not require permanence. It is beauty because it dares."

His voice is nice too, Lucifer distantly realises. A shame it is wasted on words so empty.

"I don't understand."

The angel looks around. "Hold out your hand."

Lucifer can't help but do it, intrigued. It's stupid, but as much as he hates this one… he wants to *touch.* Wants to feel clean again, feel someone's skin against his, buzzing with the Divinity that was taken from him…

What he gets instead is a silly little flower. Its petals crush easily under his fingers as he fights not to hurl it at him. "A flower."

“Beautiful because it blooms, singular because it falls.”

And *oh* doesn’t that hurt like someone has reached into his chest and pulled out his heart? His shoulder blades throb again and he feels his eyes grow wet. *No*, he tells himself, *you don’t get to cry now. Not in front of one like him—not ever.*

“That,” he says through the sandpaper in his throat, “is a very boring way to think.”

He shoves the flower in his pocket anyway, secretly rubs the silky petals between his fingertips. It’s nice, something that doesn’t recoil from him, doesn’t wither when he touches it.

“What is your name?” the angel asks him.

Lucifer swallows down the one that comes instinctually, rejects it like he’s rejected the rest. “I don’t own a name,” he says and bends, pretends to look into the red rip in the Rain Maker’s neck to hide his expression. “And you?”

“Harry,” says the angel.

Lucifer tries it out, quite likes the way it sound. So plebeian, he thinks with some delight.

“Would you like one? A name?”

Lucifer almost wants to tell him then. Reveal his real name, the one their Father gave him, and watch this angel’s pretty eyes fill with horror.

“Would you like me to give you one?”

He tries not to laugh. “Why would I need that? To be like them?” Like the mortals, puppets for his Father? No, he corrects, no longer *his*.

“Riddle,” the angel—Harry—says, and it takes him a moment to realise that this tiny little creature has just bestowed him with a name.

He opens his mouth, the word *Lucifer* on the tip of his tongue. And then Harry smiles at him, a real, warm smile, and disappears into the light.

Lucifer stands there, the rain hanging like crystals, suspended against the sun, incredulous.

“Riddle,” he says out loud. “Riddle, Riddle, Riddle.”

It’s fits, he supposes. And really—does he have a better one?

In front of him, the pool of blood has grown to the point where if he were mortal his feet would be sticky with it. *Your poor bastard* he thinks, as the evaporating soul sinks into the Earth, into his new home, where the rest of them lie, born with the sin of ignorance.

Lucifer sighs, closes his eyes, and lets the shadows swallow him piece by piece.

*

Zeb has been talking about the victory all day—apparently they'd killed thousands. Riddle, as he now calls himself privately (Thomas to the others), is bored already. A few of their eldest had spent weeks stroking egos, delicately manipulating the house of cards until it all came crashing down in a fury of anger and blood and death.

Riddle… doesn't quite know how he feels about it. He's still adjusting to that odd prickle of energy that bursts through him when he feels pain, sees sin. It scares him sometimes, how much he likes it. It's nothing though, compared to the acidic wave of self-hatred that rises through him afterwards, disgusted by the race of his heart, the wetness in his mouth. Is this why he was tossed out? Was he always this corrupt, this evil? In the deepest corners of his mind, he still pleads for his Father to listen to him, to take him back. Still wishes desperately that he would wake up, that this is all a mortal dream.

But it's not. And Riddle has become this *thing,* this *Other,* whether he likes it or not.

He pulls himself together and decides to go and watch. If anything it's good publicity. This isn't a place for weakness—he needs to be one of them now, more than ever.

With grim resignation, he reaches for his shadows and slips through, spat out into the warm air of Jebel Sahaba.

Even as his body grows powerful and tall with the suffering in the air, he notices him immediately. He's across the pit, the angel, *Harry*, pale face splattered with blood like summer freckles.

What an unexpected surprise.

He calls out his name, already gearing up for entertainment. Can't resist pushing him further, wanting to see that frown tug deeper, those green eyes dim further: "Better luck next time," he grins.

It's worth it. The angel turns away, but not before he sees misery lighting up his delicate features. The one next to him splutters out some bullshit but Riddle isn't really listening, too intent on seeing Harry twist his fingers together. What is it about him that's so captivating?

Abruptly, he remembers those watching, hears them giggle, and tunes back in to the other angel's jibes.

"Proud?" he snaps, when he's asked. "Yes, I do feel proud. Is this not a celebration of *beauty* to watch them heave out their short, fluttering lives, fill them up to the brim with passion, with fear, with anger. Is this not the truest of themselves they can become?"

And he believes it, he really does. He's jealous of them, in a way. They live and die, blissfully unaware of the hollow pretence of heaven that has wrapped its chains around him and

squeezed out all the joy, all the excitement.

Harry calls out. “For what?”

Riddle likes that he’s finally looking at him again. “Does the reason matter? They wanted more women. More crops, more land. More, more, more.”

Unfortunately, one of his own, one of power, speaks up. His voice sounds like nails on a chalkboard, even to Riddle. “Sweet angels, run along now. You have lost, this is no place for you.”

Riddle fights the urge to roll his eyes. *Come on,* he wants to say, *can’t we at least have a little fun with them?* They are *demons*, they’re not supposed to take it all so seriously.

But no, it’s not to be. The angels fly off, offended, and dutifully, he begins to breathe in the pain of the dying. It’s hard to tamp down on the urge to reveal his true visage, horns and black eyes and all, but there’s no reason why one as young as him would have such an clear tell of power. They might figure it out, and he’s been so careful to hide his scars.

Zeb’s father, Belial, tells him there’s a ritual they can use to seed his wings, that if Riddle swears his allegiance he will use it and Riddle will fly again. It makes him feel sick, the thought of having someone like that under his skin, sewing them together in such an intimate way. Particularly when he suspects that Belial knows who he is, is just biding his time until he can be used as a weapon or a pawn or something else entirely.

But then his shoulder blades ache and he thinks of the wind in his face, the world spread below him like a patchwork map of colour, and he thinks for that, he could bear it.

*

He lies on his back on the top of the old abandoned clock tower and feels his cheeks grow wet. The thing inside him, that unfamiliar, bright thing, it burns and it hurts but it’s simultaneously the best feeling he’s ever felt.

“Harry,” he mouths out loud, names the thing inside him. “Harry.”

He still can’t believe it. It was so utterly unexpected that it makes him dizzy.

He’d had enough. Belial had him collecting the hearts that he was owed. The first one had been terrible, so messy: he’d plunged his hand into the woman’s chest and broken his own finger on her ribcage, unaccustomed to the amount of power required to break through. She’d screamed and scratched at his face, and as he’d torn the heart free, blood getting everywhere, Zeb had doubled over laughing. He’d realised it the next second: it was a lung in his fist, not a heart.

By the 706th he had it down to an art form. *In—twist—out—into the basket.* But somehow, although the physical motion was easier, something weird was happening to his head. He was growing number and number, until eventually he wasn't sure if he was really there or not, if the screams were real or if it was just the ringing in his ears. Everything felt muted, like he was deep underwater. Even as Belial had praised him when he'd slopped the black-stained wicker basket on the top of that impressive desk, Riddle couldn't find anything in himself to smile.

He'd been like that for days. Until he'd realised that, actually, he kinda didn't want to be.

From there it had been easy: get to the kennels, kill a couple of Dantalion's prized hellhounds, and wait for their tutor to realise. It hadn't taken long.

What he hadn't expected, though, was for his brain to somehow leap back into action once the demon had a sword at his throat. *Why*, he thought, desperately, as he tore himself into the shadows, *now?* He wanted to die, didn't he? So why did his power take him to that stupid angel again? Why did he grab onto that white robe?

And then even though he'd recovered his senses—let that horrible slobbering beast dive straight for him—it had been too late. The angel had stepped in and stopped it, as, Riddle supposes, his subconscious must have known.

So yes, it hadn't gone quite to plan.

But the next part, the part where the fool had actually *sewed him up with his own Divinity.* That was…

Riddle rests his hands on top of his chest and stares into the mist, feels the pulse of bright light where he used to be empty.

Does Harry really understand what he's done? Forget Belial. Riddle is now one of the most powerful in this whole realm. This amount of Divinity… it's as if he'd eaten up the top ten. Like this, he could reveal himself as Lucifer. He'd probably survive it if he did.

Although, he admits, he's not in any rush. And maybe things would be easier as Thomas. Less weight to the name, certainly.

He trails his fingers around the blood-sticky skin of his collarbones, imagines it's Harry's hands, Harry's fingertips. He shivers, thinks of green eyes, sharp with fury directed at Dantalion, and then wet like seaweed under the moon, overspilling as he had cried for Riddle's pain.

His chest warms again, and he isn't sure if it's from his new gift, or—or something else entirely.

*

Rome, and Nero, and the persecution of the Christians… he can't lie, it's pretty fun.

He's been different recently; it's easier to push away the self-recrimination he used to feel, really get into the tasks he's been set. He's even finding it more and more amusing to tease Zeb with his stiff little traditions and rituals, prod and poke until the teenager loses his temper and goes for his throat.

To be fair, some of it might be his new wings. He just had to let a *tiny little hint* of his new power slip to Belial and just like that the ritual was set up for the next day.

It was… pretty unpleasant, but then again he thinks Belial had made it that way on purpose, probably pissed off to be threatened by someone so supposedly inferior to him, however subtly.

So yes, Rome is fun. Even more fun, if he's honest with himself, because his angel is there too—and *mortal*! He wonders if Harry has found it as much of a struggle as he has, getting used to the peculiar weight of a human form, the way their mannerisms cling like mud. There's a part of him that wishes he could have seen it, wonders what Harry would have been like as a mortal child. He probably never cried.

Of course he'd pushed to be here as soon as he'd found out. Dragging Nero down is actually a pretty senior job, and not really one that *past him* would have gotten—but he couldn't exactly let it go to anyone else now, could he?

He feels Harry's eyes on him as he strides by in the street during the weekly market, can't help but pull himself taller, make his smile just a little more charming. The noble he's courting (on behalf of Nero, of course) pulls his arm around her, and he lets her, smooths his thumb under her robe near her neck just to see her cheeks rush red with blood. And—*there*, he winks.

Beautiful: that little nose wrinkle, the way Harry fights to school his expression of disdain as their paths cross.

Why is it so addicting? Riddle doesn't know. Could be the tiny piece of his soul now embedded within Riddle's… but even if it is, he doesn't care. All he cares about is having fun and never going back to that empty feeling of before. And really, Harry does such an excellent job of filling him up. Of course Riddle is going to follow him, what did he expect?

And then, all of a sudden, it goes wrong.

Prior to that, it was actually all going rather well. He watches as Harry is led to the fires like the rest of them. *See,* he wants to say, *look at what I can do. Aren't you scared? Aren't you humbled?*

It's not like the angel will actually die. He'll feel pain, but he won't die, and then he'll be even more incensed, come and seek Riddle out and snarl at him, break composure.

Riddle can't wait.

But then—then he's *in the fire,* and he's making these noises, the screams that usually make Riddle feel all warm inside, but this time it just has this hot, uncomfortable feeling pressing at his throat.

He's moving before he even thinks to, reaching into the flames, even though his own mortal skin blackens up immediately, to yank him free, or what's left of him—

And oh, what is this feeling? This isn't—isn't fun, this is—

Awful.

What has he done?

He stares at this creaking, dying thing, incongruous with the beautiful blue day around them. Sees the edges of Harry peeking out around it already, his angel form filling up again, striving to free itself of his mortal pain. He pushes his dagger in, in and in, right into the heart. He's good at that now; he's had a lot of practise after all.

"Why," he can't help but spit out a moment later, horrified, "are you *smiling*?"

Harry's voice is shredded, horrible to listen to but Riddle still leans in to hear it better. "Because this is a kindness," he croaks, and Riddle feels like his stomach, all of his organs have suddenly ossified and turned to stone.

"I've just stabbed you through the heart," he points out, voice shaking, "and you call me kind?"

The angel in front of him begins to gather light, momentum. "Yes, Riddle," he says as the rest of him crumples into cold, empty flesh.

Riddle's eyes are wide even though the smoke stings them. He can see the guards behind him talking amongst themselves and pointing, probably confused as to why he lunged into a fire just to stab someone to death. Hell—they're all mad enough that this might actually reflect well on him in the long-term.

"I didn't think it would feel like this," he says distantly. "I don't want you to hurt."

But Harry is gone already, a blackened shell the only thing that remains.

Riddle breathes in the ash of the dying. Breathes out. He's confused… But he also has a job to do. Harry will reappear, he tells himself, he always does.

He repeats it as he stumbles back to the Emperor's box, feels that broad hand clap him on his back, slide down to the base of his spine to squeeze at him. He only grins in response, teeth a little too sharp, and stares at that dark spot on the grass, far below.

*

Riddle is dismayed at how weak he's become. Look at him—sulking, killing far more than he has to, just because Harry won't play with him. When did this happen? He sits and ruminates in his shadows, frowning, for a good week, until eventually one of the other demons comes and drags him away to some mortal-inspired poker game.

He's not really enjoying himself, bored with watching them compete for his interest and try to cheat, when one of them pipes up with something actually interesting.

Riddle makes Valefar repeat his words immediately.

The peripeteia, he says excitedly, eyes shining like black beetles, has apparently been found.

Someone else asks him if he's heard of it and he has to squash his urge to scoff. *Heard of it?* He *invented* the damn thing. Back when his wings were white, back when his Father would listen, they'd talked about it, about a way to make things fair.

His mouth suddenly tastes sour, and his fingers itch. He wants freedom again, wants to bathe in it, remind himself that he's no longer that meek, servile son. Blood, he knows, is the best way to find that feeling.

Once he wins (and of course he does) he indulges a little, slashes the throat of the loser and drinks down their Divinity in a hot gulp. It's easier now that he has so much of his own. The cards lie covered in cooling pools of black, his 'friends' cackling and whooping, frothed up to a frenzy by his own blood lust.

He sighs.

As he skulks back to the clock tower he's claimed as his own, pleasantly drunk, the only thing that fills his mind is Harry. God, when did whiskey make him so morose? He banishes the ethanol in his bloodstream with a thought, watches as it twirls out of his cells in a thin, translucent stream until the balls of it float gently in the air before him. He almost drinks them again.

"Where have you gone?" he mumbles as he lies on his bed. He looks at the black jar on his windowsill. He knows what lies inside, gently preserved by his own shadows, every crease, every futile speck of pollen. It's so gross that he kept it, so humiliating.

He can't sleep these days.

That's his excuse for why he grabs it, heads to the place he first found himself when he Fell. With the power he has now he's built it into a magnificent castle-like abode, a large empty shell to match its owner. As impressive as it may be, it's still surrounded by a tangled wilderness, a remnant of what the land used to be.

The glass of the jar is cold in his claws as he walks into the shadows of the trees, finds a good spot and sits down. He waves a hand and in front of him the air shimmers. His shadows go

looking, slipping across the realm until they find what he needs and brings it back. Wood, glass, metal. They begin to stack up, afloat in the air, until he gives them a nod and then burst to life. He watches, munches on some crisps as they twist together, split and join, until in less than a minute it's completed.

It's a large greenhouse, but nothing special. Inside is empty and a little dusty, already warming from the sun ahead.

Riddle walks in through the door and absentmindedly weaves a boundary in place. This is *his* place—nobody will enter, not unless they have permission. Once he's in the middle, directly under the glass dome at the top, he squats down and places the jar on the ground in front. He lets his shadows dissolve away, the glass too, until just the tiny pink flower rests in his palm.

Beautiful because it blooms, singular because it falls, he hears again, and he shudders.

"Stop running from me," he says to it, and then feels like a monumental idiot for talking to a flower.

For a moment more he stares, thoughtful, before he gets to his feet to search for wherever his shadows put the soil. He has no idea how to grow a thing like this—but he can at least try.

Years pass.

The whispers of the peripeteia are no longer privy only to the upper echelon of Hell. No, now the wolves howl it, Cthulhu moans it in the deep, the fire imps opens their hungry little mouths to taste the it on their sharp forked tongues. It's all anyone can all talk about.

Riddle starts to use the greenhouse as a bit of an escape. He likes pottering around in there, trying different combinations of soil, mutagens, air, heat. The little pink flower no longer exists in the world, hasn't for thousands of years. And it's surprisingly delicate—whatever he tries, he can't quite get it to grow as healthily as he would like.

He's in there, one slow, sleepy Sunday, when he feels a familiar *pull.* His head whips up immediately from where he'd been watering his latest batch, his eyes wide.

That was Harry, he thinks, thoughts racing. *He called to me.*

Body still, hardly breathing, he searches through the mortal realm in his mind, tracing back the call. Harry's blocked him off now, snapped his mind closed immediately, but Riddle is powerful now, Riddle can find him.

He wipes his hands clean on his trousers and hunts.

He's good at staying unnoticed. He's been doing it his whole existence as 'Riddle', after all, keeping his secrets close to his chest. So when he finds himself in Asia, on the flat roof of a sleeping house, it's easy to stay out of sight, out of the way of Harry's—surprisingly dulled—instincts.

He floats down to the window, uses his power to shift aside the blinds.

Harry, he thinks (half fond, half annoyed), has gotten pretty complacent. He's curled next to a young child on a single bed, his soft pale limbs all still and silver with the moonlight. Something in Riddle's chest settles finally. He looks… happy. Sated. His palm is wrapped around the girl's stubby fingers, his large, powerful frame almost falling off the bed. And his wings… Riddle stares at them. Usually Harry keeps them hidden and he can see why. They're beautiful. Covetously beautiful. If any of his kind saw them, they would want to ruin him.

Riddle slinks back up to the roof and melds himself into the shadows. Ahead, the stars wink occasionally, and he finds himself wondering if any of those planets have beings like him. Thinks about how far into the past he's staring, how weak the light is by the time it reaches his eyes.

Beneath him, he can hear Harry's soft wisps of breath, in and out, like a calm, inescapable tide, and despite his best efforts, he can feel his own eyes closing. It's surprising—he hasn't been able to sleep in weeks, and the roof is cold and hard against his back.

He doesn't even remember drifting off.

Riddle is no fool.

He realises who she is, this girl, after a mere week of trailing after them. But what he can't work out is—why *Harry?* Why pick *him*? For months he pulls at his hair at the thought of this being some kind of message from his Father, finally, after the *millennia* of silence.

The other terrible realisation to come out of this is that Harry is, objectively, far too sacrificial. It burns in his chest, every time he sees the angel gladly get knocked into the ground to make sure his charge doesn't fall over, every time he cries because she loses a tooth (Riddle is appalled). Any time his siblings visit him, ask for favours, advice, Harry gives it as willingly as one is able.

Riddle loathes it. Because he knows what it means—that the little stunt he pulled with his Divinity, it wasn't because Riddle was special. No, he just did it because it was *the right thing to do.*

Once he realises this he goes back to Hell for a while. Indulges in every possible sin he can find for a good year, until he's so swept up in the frenzy of it that he ends up knocked out in the bathtub for a week. When he emerges, blinking at the daylight that streams in through the window of his room, a little shadow servant ringing his hands, he has to laugh at himself.

He's not a child. What did he expect? That he would be special, that someone would love him?

No. And whatever light thing it was that filled his veins slowly gets pushed out by ice instead. *You're evil, remember?* he tells himself. God wanted this for you.

He downs a lesser demon to regain some energy and goes back to the greenhouse. He's pleased to see his latest attempt is still thriving, despite the lack of attention. This one, he thinks, is the winner—give it a few more months and he may even take it back to the clock tower, somewhere he can see it every day, breathe in that familiar, nostalgic fragrance.

Settled somewhat, he decides to head back.

The girl is now of school age. Harry drifts aimlessly in the back of the classroom, half asleep most of the time, far too unaware to catch sight of his silent, watchful stalker. It's all too easy to hold him down with shadows when he sleeps, follow him into his dreams and begin to spin and twist a web that ensnares him so thoroughly that Riddle is free to do what he likes with his precious charge. And it's so easy too—she's so familiar with Harry's own power, that when Riddle slinks inside, coats himself in that scrap of gifted Divinity, there's barely any resistance.

He scrapes around inside himself, his own rage and misery and hopelessness, and presses it into the softness of her soul, gently, delicately.

It makes him feel good. Why should he lie about it? And Harry's worry does too, the way he starts to go frantic, to seek out help, nibble those pretty lips with concern… yeah, that makes him feel good too. *See*, he wants to say. Y*ou did this to me, so I'll do it to you—it's only fair, isn't it?*

Easy, so easy to keep this up. A year slips by. She grows worse and worse, and Riddle's hatred inside him burns stronger and stronger the more time he spends around someone that doesn't care. Not once does he go looking for Riddle. Not once does he dream of him, or speak his name, or give any indication that there's a being out there filled up with his own soul.

Riddle's thoughts begin to slip.

He splits his time between half-heartedly taking over Hell (killing off the Dukes when he has a bad day, inciting a couple of riots, some violent games when it's been a good one) and visiting Maya and Harry.

Maybe, he thinks, maybe I was right all along. I don't want this. I don't want to be here. If anything, I'm still following the last orders of my Father. He told me to live, and here I am, alive.

A voice pipes up inside him, snake-like: *wouldn't it be the ultimate defiance—to destroy yourself instead?*

He can't say he thinks too long on it. He's never been one to draw out decisions. It's all straightforward inside his head, logical even. He will kill the peripeteia, Harry will call on one of his siblings, and then Riddle will let himself die.

*

Of course *he* throws a wrench in the plan. Of course he does—when has he ever been any sort of accommodatingly predictable?

When it finally happens, Riddle can't breathe. He stands there useless and gaping as that great killing light hits the angel, the one that had named him, and the mortal child's tiny sputtering soul withers on the ground, meters below. He can't breathe and then he does, runs forward, his limbs quick and sharp, and he punches his fist into his old brother's chest, finds his light and *rips*.

It burns. It hurts and his hand smokes, Ezekiel's cries tearing at the part of him that remembers when together they'd leant over the first mortal fire, pleased and proud. But he made his decision. In that split second, when Harry had offered himself up to save him, it was already done. Cemented. Harry won't understand it, of course he won't, but Riddle can see it for what it was: an offering.

Harry is his now. Will be his, forever. This is always what was meant to be.

So he forces himself to chew on what feels like a caught lightening bolt, even though it shears through his teeth and his tongue, he forces himself to swallow it down, to let that great dead weight drop to the ground.

And there, lying on the stone roof is his angel. Harry's tears wet his cheeks, green eyes glittering in the sun.

He floats over, high, drunk off power and lust. *Mine*, he thinks, staring down. *All mine.*

"My dear Harry," he can't stop the words now.

He gets a croak in response: "let me pass in peace."

And isn't that laughable? It's no longer up to Harry. Riddle will spin his web so tight, so cleverly that Harry won't even realise.

"Oh no," he says, "you don't get to do that now."

The angel's energy flutters. He's going to drop, he realises, straight through to Hell. It's child's play to reach out a finger, hold the threads still until he can make this one final deal.

His fingertips find the familiar mess of black hair, stroke through it until they reach his forehead. *Heal him*, Riddle commands, and this new power, it jumps to obey like a well trained dog.

"Don't fall asleep on me," he tells him. He nuzzles in, breathes in his angel, his sweat and tears. Sees his wings crumble, his face drain of colour. Riddle always loved his wings. But so did others, and that wouldn't do, would it?

He can't help but tease, can't help but gift Harry his own mantra, the one he's used over and over again. "Beautiful because it blooms, singular because it falls."

Harry doesn't seem to take it in quite the way he intended. "Leave me," he begs.

Riddle wants to shake him. Laugh at him. Leave him? They'll never be apart again. He finds himself mumbling to him, little glass shards of truth that well up in his throat, spill down his tongue like blood. "Harry, don't you see? You saved me. You *ruined yourself* for me."

"You killed him," Harry cries.

Riddle realises he means the one who was once a sibling. "He didn't mean anything, darling." The endearment slips out, feels right on his lips.

And Harry feebly reaches behind, tries to touch what used to be feather and bone and sobs. It makes something hot uncurl in Riddle's gut, before he remembers how he felt, when he Fell. How he screamed when his wings fell away to nothing.

"I'll get them back for you," he promises darkly. His Harry will have whatever he wants. "I promise you, you'll fly again."

"Why are you doing this?"

He smiles then. Isn't it obvious? "Because I love you." The explanation spills out, he can't stop it. "I didn't want this—this existence. I was going to let him kill me. And then, of course, it was you. It's alway you. I was going to forget you, you know, I know it was never personal for you—it's just how you are. And then you…" he has to take a pause then, to calm himself down. "You almost *died,* Harry." He can't help the way he presses him closer, into his chest, where his arms can circle round him, pull him in, protective.

"I let you stab me in the heart as I burned," his angel says, "I cut out a piece of myself for you!"

The words make him shiver with pleasure, but he forces the feeling away. "Yes but I know you, you want to save everyone."

"I still do. That's why I tried so hard to…"

Riddle knows where his sentence is going. And suddenly it all comes together in one beautiful, suspended picture: exactly how he can bind him by his side. Harry's fault has always been that he loves too dearly—*of course* that will be the anchor.

"I will make you a deal," he says, his mind spinning ahead as fast as it can. The words… which words will get him to agree?

"I don't want your deal."

It's so, painfully, obvious what he needs to say. "I will give you back your child."

The angel stiffens in his arms. "What?"

"Only for you. Only because I need you." It feels nice to say the truth finally. Besides, if he can lead them there, Harry won't remember this in just a few moments.

“How can you be so cruel?” But there he goes again. Unpredictable. “To tell me these things —after what you’ve done?”

Harry’s cheeks are smooth and wet and pale under his burnt fingers as he cups them. He forces sincerity into his voice. “No, no, it’s no joke. I swear to you, I will give her back to you.”

There. He sees the crack, resists the urge to widen it too quickly. *Ah my darling*, he thinks, *you’re too good and that makes you easy*.

“What is your deal?” the angel says, as expected.

Riddle pretends to think. “You will spend five days in Hell, with me. If, by the end of that time, you still wish to return to the mortal world, I will let both you and the peripeteia go freely. I swear it. But if you choose to stay… then both of you belong to me.”

His power crackles in the air, eager to swoop in and bind. *Wait,* he tells it. *We’re almost there, I can see him breaking.*

“What is your catch?” he asks.

A fair question. And here it comes: “You will forget this conversation.”

And then—then he agrees, just as Riddle knew he would.

He *agrees,* which means Riddle must loosen that string he had pulled taught, the one that has been trying to drag Harry down to the shores of the Acheron.

But not yet.

For a moment he sits, enjoys the feeling of Harry cradled to him. Watches that pale, pretty face, stilling as he dies. He nuzzles his nose over his cheeks, presses their lips together, strokes his hair from his eyes.

“Harry,” he whispers. “Harry, Harry, Harry.”

It’s only once he feels the crackle of the other angels on the horizon, hears the insistent drone of the ambulance below that he sighs. Lifts his head into the sun and lets go.

Harry falls, down and down.

And Riddle looks up to the sky and laughs.

Chapter End Notes

...and we're finished!!

this was originally only supposed to be around 30k words lmao but three months later here we are! i definitely sprinted through a lot of it - i think if i were ever to come back it'd end up being def 100k+. but as is it i'm happy leaving it here as a first draft :)

if you got this far then thank you so much for reading, and in particular a huge thanks to those who left such encouraging comments (and helped point out my stupid mistakes!!), i would never have finished this if i wasn’t so inspired by your kind feedback!

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